

# **Truth On Fire**

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## A Study in Profiling

On Christmas Day 2009, a Nigerian Muslim terrorist named Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab attempted to detonate a bomb while aboard Flight 253 from Amsterdam to Detroit that was in its final hour. If he had been successful, aircraft debris (including roughly three hundred souls on board) would have littered the landscape of Ontario. In spite of DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano's vacuous assertion that "the system worked" it is clear that the providential mercy of God alone was responsible for foiling this latest attempt at mass murder.

In a recent Twitter post, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich opined: "We need a new policy of systematically going after terrorists that involves explicit profiling...for behavior." Ann Coulter offered this analysis in her latest column: "Since Muslims took down Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988, every attack on a commercial airliner has been committed by foreign-born Muslim men with the same hair color, eye color and skin color." I agree with both, and believe profiling for potential terrorists would be a no-brainer except for political correctness run amuck!

What exactly is profiling? Is it moral? Is it biblical? According to Merriam-Webster OnLine, profiling is "the act of suspecting or targeting a person on the basis of observed characteristics or behavior." So, if two eyewitnesses concur that they heard gunshots emanating from a bank, and saw a sixtyish gray-haired Caucasian male with a Miami Hurricane ball cap exiting the bank with gun in hand, jumping into a blue Chevy pick-up and fleeing the scene, would this not eliminate as suspect every female and non-Caucasian male in town? Would not police be in a position to fine-tune the manhunt based on the profile provided? The fact is it would be immoral for police to have this information and then issue an order *not* to target men fitting that description!

In addition to being a useful moral exercise, profiling can be a biblical-spiritual exercise as well. In fact, a study of scripture reveals that God has done a little profiling of his own, and may indeed be the author of it. Moreover, profiling can be both inclusionary and exclusionary in scope depending on the preferred divine disposition.

One of our Old Testament heroes is Gideon, son of Joash the Abiezrite (Judges 6-7). For seven long years the Midianites had ransacked the Israelites and, metaphorically speaking, made them pound sand. In response to Gideon's complaint, the angel of the Lord assured him that salvation was on the way (6:14), and that his presence would ensure it (6:16). After a cycle of sacrifice, destruction of the Baal altar, construction of an altar to the Lord, trumpet blowing, volunteer army assemblage and two fleeces (6:19-40), Gideon was ready to make war with the thirty-two thousand men who had responded to his call (7:1).

I am quite certain Gideon was far more comfortable with these odds than he was when first confronted with the prospect of victory. But in his Lord's reckoning, the odds were too good (i.e., good enough for Israel to "*vaunt themselves*" in post-victory reflection). So the Lord set up a stage-one profile, which was essentially an exercise in self-analysis. Those who were "*fearful and afraid*" were set at liberty to break camp and go home.

Better than two out of three (twenty-two thousand) took that liberty and left ten thousand fearless men to wage war (7:2-3).

But fearlessness alone did not satisfy the divine profile for combatants. The Lord implemented a stage-two profile, instructing Gideon to set aside every one that *lapped water with his tongue* as a dog laps water into one group and those who *bowed on their knees to drink* into another group (7:4-7). God was clearly targeting two different kinds of men based on observable characteristics. The Lord was the profiler, not Gideon. Only after profiling was complete did Gideon know that his combat troops would number three hundred.

The stage-two profile began with ten thousand *fearless* men, but unfortunately nine-thousand seven hundred of them were *careless* men, whose physical thirst drove them to take a defenseless posture at water's edge. Some scholars tell us that such a readiness to genuflect was indicative of Baal worship. In any case, God disqualified them...for carelessness at a minimum. In the profiling God conducted regarding Gideon, stage-one *fearlessness* was an inclusionary trait. Stage-two *carelessness*, on the other hand, was exclusionary in its scope.

Down through the centuries to the current age, the fearful and careless are still as unfit to engage in spiritual combat as are Islamic Jihadists to board a commercial airliner! The good news, however, is that the results of divine profiling can change. Fearful men and women can become fearless with a fresh infilling of the Holy Ghost! And under his divine influence, the careless believer can become disciplined and steadfast in his or her spiritual demeanor...and make a difference for the Lord Jesus in this present world!

## Change We Can Believe In!

In the political arena it has become perhaps the most common of campaign themes: CHANGE! It is designed to appeal to an electorate fed up with the state of things (incumbents, national security, economy, etc.). In its latest iteration, it was proffered as "Change We Can Believe In!" Frankly, it's been a long time since a politician promised something I could believe in and then delivered on the promise.

In the spiritual realm, however, change has been and continues to be a biblical theme that offers both instruction and expectation for the people of God. The multi-faceted references to change as recorded in scripture are timeless in their application! Let's examine a few of those facets.

First is the changeless nature of God. As his spokesman, the prophet Malachi proclaimed: "*For I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed*" (3:6). The context is one of impending judgment upon Israel because of sorcerers, adulterers, liars, abusive employers, oppressors of widows and orphans—all of whom collectively had become a national malignancy (3:5). Although Israel was worthy of being obliterated from the face of the earth, the Lord's deep and enduring compassion for his people precluded such an outcome! Those of us who believe on the Lord Jesus are afforded the same consolation in that he is "*the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever*" (Hebrews 13:8).

The second is a change of garments reflective of a change in spiritual disposition. The first mention of *change* in scripture finds Jacob speaking the following words to his household and entourage: "*Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments*" (Genesis 35:2). The context has Jacob readying them for a journey to Bethel through hostile territory where he would build an altar unto God. An altar implies worship, which is inextricably linked to spiritual cleanliness.

The people complied by surrendering their idols and earrings (35:4). The garments to be changed were no doubt imbedded with similar idolatrous representations. These garments told a story to observers about the wearer's god...and still do to some extent. I have never believed you can sanctify a man or woman by simply changing his or her wardrobe, but have always believed that those with clean hearts will adopt an outward appearance in line with their worship. God honored their actions in that the cities round about were fearful to pursue them as they pursued the will of God! Oh that God would grant such favor to us in our worship and walk!

The third is an avoidance of change. Solomon wrote: "*My son, fear thou the Lord and the king: and meddle not with them that are given to change*" (Proverbs 24:21). In contrast to the fear one renders to the Lord (King of kings) and the king (his earthly proxy) is the caution one should exercise with respect to building relationships. *Meddle* means "to pledge, exchange pledges, engage." It signifies a binding relationship where one individual becomes surety for another. The NT equivalent of one given to change is the *double-minded man* who is *unstable in all his ways* (James 1:8). We should avoid the obligatory entwining of our lives with those marked by spiritual instability. God is not

given to change. Nor are kings who represent him. It is evident that those given to change lack a solid God connection...and should lack one with us as well.

The fourth is a change of life. Paul wrote: "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3:18). Changed is the present passive of **metamorphow**, meaning "to change into another form." It is used of Christ's transfiguration where the Shekinah glory shrouded by flesh was allowed to manifest itself externally. As believers expose themselves to the truth on a regular basis, and meditate therein unto obedience, the initial glory implanted at regeneration becomes increasingly radiant through the passage of time, bringing the child of God into greater conformity to the image of Christ.

The fifth is a permanent change of state. Again, Paul declared: "Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:51-52). The phrase shall be changed is the future passive of the verb **allasso**, meaning "to exchange one thing for another, to cause one thing to cease and another to take its place." The passive voice signifies that we will be recipients of a transformation that only God can perform. In a moment our corruptible bodies shall be made incorruptible!

In like manner Paul, concerning the Lord Jesus, said: "*Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body*" (Philippians 3:21). *Changed* is the future tense of **metaschematizo**, meaning "to change the figure of something." Our English word "schematic" derives from this root. At the last trump, God is going to fit his children with a schematical upgrade on a par with the resurrected Christ!

We have all learned from experience that the promise of change, when offered by a politician, is to be taken with a giant grain of salt. But when the Lord speaks of change, we do well to open our spiritual ears. His changeless nature should prompt our humble gratitude, motivate us to change our garments as appropriate, and exercise caution in the relationships we build. Moreover, the prospect of progressive transformation from glory to glory in this life followed by permanent transformation in the life to come is...well...change we can believe in!

## A Word About Words

In private conversations that took place during the 2008 presidential campaign, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid referred to then-candidate Barack Obama as a "light-skinned" black man "with no Negro dialect unless he wanted to have one." His comments were quoted in "Game Change", a recently published book about the 2008 campaign. Reid apologized for "using such a poor choice of words." The President accepted his apology.

Reid's poor choice of words is a teachable moment that has absolutely nothing to do with any alleged attitude regarding race. It has every thing to do with the importance of words and how we employ them in our daily lives. Words mean things! They can be a means of blessing or come back to bite us!

The Word of God is a virtual encyclopedia on the subject of "words." The plural form occurs 548 times in the KJV. Among them are the words that God speaks to man, the words spoken by men to God, and those spoken by men to other men. Let's consider a few of its usages.

Atop the list are references to scripture. David said: "*The words of the Lord are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times*" (Psalm 12:6). The word *pure* signifies no admixture of error. The silver metaphor stresses the absence of impurity. The words of the Lord are an extension of his holy character! And because they are impeccably pure, they shall be eternally preserved (Psalm 12:7; Mark 13:31). No sinner is at risk who stakes his or her eternal destiny upon the veracity of those words!

The words of God serve as our primary source of spiritual enlightenment. Again, David writes: "*The entrance of thy words giveth light*" (Psalm 119:130). The word *entrance* conveys the idea of a declaration or an unfolding that is clear and precise in its presentation. For three years Peter lived twenty-four/seven under the influence of those light-giving words. On a day when DINO's (Disciples In Name Only) were abandoning his ministry, our Lord asked the twelve: "*Will ye also go away?*" (John 6:67). Peter responded: "*Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life*" (6:68). Peter's rejoinder teaches us that (1) the blue-collar believer is capable of profound spiritual insight, and (2) the Bible is the only book on the planet with these kinds of words!

The scriptures teach us that contempt for the words of God is at the core of spiritual rebellion. According to the Psalmist, those who *sit in darkness* do so because "*they rebelled against the words of God, and contemned the counsel of the most High*" (Psalm 107:10-11). The Lord through Asaph likewise rebuked the *wicked* ones that "*hatest instruction, and casteth my words behind them*" (Psalm 50 17). It may sound simplistic, but the single determining factor in one's eternal destiny comes down to how he or she responds to words...God's words!

There are several contexts in which words are directly related to prayer. Mark 14:32-39 relates the experience of Jesus in Gethsemane on crucifixion eve. His soul was *exceeding sorrowful* as he anticipated the coming trauma as our sin offering. With his

will yielded to the Father, he explored the possibility that the cup of suffering might be taken away. He returned to find the disciples sleeping, and *“again he went away, and prayed, and spake the same words”* (14:39). His repetition of words is evidence of a laser-like focus upon the task at hand as opposed to some shallow tactic to gain the Father's ear (Matthew 6:7). It teaches us that the repetition of words in prayer is never a vain exercise when coupled with surrender to the will of God.

God's spokesman Hosea issued the following prayer invitation to a backslidden Israel: *“O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words, and turn to the Lord”* (14:1-2). Those *words* were to include a petition to take away their sins and receive them graciously. The prophet told them what to expect if they approached the Lord with such heart-felt words: *“I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely; for mine anger is turned away from him”* (14:4). There's only one thing that prevents a backslidden child of God from experiencing deliverance and renewed freedom in the Lord Jesus—a lack of the right words!

The interaction between Moses and brother Aaron teaches us that words can have a stewardship (Exodus 4:27-31). The Lord instructed Aaron to go into the wilderness to meet Moses at the mount of God, where Moses told Aaron *all the words* of the Lord. They gathered the elders of Israel together, and Aaron spoke *all the words* that the Lord had spoken unto Moses. There was a sacred chain of custody. Moses got words from God. Aaron got them from Moses. The elders got them from Aaron. It was critical that the words given by God were the exact words heard by the elders. The stewardship of words has many applications, but none is greater than that of the man of God whose job it is to study the words of God diligently and preach them with exactitude!

Words play a vital role in our lives. Whether we're studying the Word of God, engaging in prayer, or interacting with others, we are dealing with and handing words! May the Lord enable us to place the proper value on those words in every aspect of our lives!

## Prison Prosperity

Any background check for a prospective employee that reveals the applicant has a prison record is in most cases a showstopper. Former inmates are usually considered too much of a risk for an employer to take. But from a biblical perspective, prison time may well be a badge of honor.

Some of the Bible's best have done prison time. Joseph did a two-year stretch in Egypt for protecting his sexual purity (Genesis 41:1). John the Baptist did prison time for a public rebuke of an adulterous Herod (Mark 6:17). Samson did time in a Philistine prison although it was an incarceration due to compromise (Judges 16:21). It nevertheless became the venue for Nazarite-like hair growth that prepared him to avenge his adversaries.

In Acts 16:19-25, Luke recorded another well-known prison experience that Paul and Silas endured at the hands of Philippian magistrates. They were accused by the masters of a former soothsayer of exceedingly troubling the city by teaching "unlawful" customs to Romans (legal issue). But the context reveals the masters were motivated by a loss of soothsaying revenue (financial issue). The old adage "follow the money" was as true then as it is now. Once the multitude joined in the opposition, the magistrates succumbed to public pressure, issued a command to *beat them*, laid *many stripes* upon them, and *cast them into prison* (16:22-23).

If the *Philippi Times* had covered this story, a reporter might have informed readers that some troublemaking vagabond preachers, scrounging day-to-day on freewill offerings and pocket change, had suffered a potentially fatal setback. The fact is Paul and Silas experienced prosperity in that prison far beyond the reach of financial wizardry. No seven-digit bank balance can rival the riches experienced by these servants of the most-high God. How then shall we measure the prosperity of these dirt-poor itinerate preachers?

First is the wealth in their identity. After Pentecost, the apostles were beaten by the Jewish council for preaching the gospel...but were not imprisoned. They departed from the council "*rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name*" (Acts 5:40-41). Paul and Silas no doubt reckoned likewise. But this was no first for Paul. He was previously stoned at Lystra, dragged from the city, and left for dead (Acts 14:19). He concluded his Galatian epistle as follows: "*I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus*" (Galatians 6:17). These are the words of a wealthy man who had jettisoned the "dung" of his Pharisaical past to win Christ (Philippians 3:8).

Identification with Jesus in his sufferings is priceless! The Jews crucified our Lord because his was a life of perfect righteousness lived out in the midst spiritual and moral defilement. Godliness is the time-tested path to persecution (2 Timothy 3:12). Godly men and women who endure persecution (without regard for the degree to which the enemy dishes it out) are filling their spiritual coffers with heavenly wealth.

In contrast to the Prosperity Gospel are these words: "*For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake*" (Philippians

1:29). Believing and suffering are intrinsic to a life of godliness. Now, the Bible teaches us to sow financial seed with expectation of a bountiful harvest. But it takes a lot more than a financial windfall to seal an identity with Jesus of Nazareth. It is suffering that seals the deal!

Secondly is the wealth in their liberty. At midnight they *prayed*, and *sang praises* (16:25). *Prayed* is a present participle, nominative case. *Sang praises* is the imperfect of **humnew**, meaning “to sing a hymn (esp. Psalms).” Expanded translation: “Paul and Silas, ones who were continuously in prayer mode, kept on singing hymns up to and through the midnight hour.” The result was Spirit-induced liberty (2 Corinthians 3:17). The jailor who shackled them beheld two unshackled spirits, and in short order inquired of them how this same liberty might be his. The recent Tiger Woods scandal reminds us that a billion dollars in career earnings has no liberating power whatsoever when it comes to the shackles of carnal lust.

Thirdly is the wealth in their opportunity. Spiritual liberty begets evangelistic opportunity. Thus “*the prisoners heard them*” (16:25). *Heard* is the imperfect of **epakrouomai**, meaning “to listen to.” An expanded translation: “The prisoners kept on listening to what Paul and Silas kept on praying and singing.” Jesus affirmed the worth of man when he asked: “*What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?*” (Mark 8:36). Believers who seize opportunities to plant gospel seed in the ears of the lost are handling priceless treasure. Luke is silent in terms of prisoners saved, but tells us the jailor and his entire family believed (16:34).

It occurs to me that an absence of prayer and praise in this prison saga would have limited the wealth of these men. Engaging in the same set the stage for a spiritual windfall that led to the salvation of many and formed the nucleus of the Philippian church—one that endeared itself to the apostle throughout his ministry. God clearly reckons prosperity in a manner the world cannot comprehend. May he grant to every one of us the same prison prosperity in our identity, liberty and opportunity as we seek to live our lives on the cutting edge of godliness!

## The God Who Divides

Political observers these days are telling us what we already know: our nation is as partisan as ever and divided as never before. Their argument is that division is an impediment to progress. Such a thesis might hold water in some cases. But in others, division is often the prelude to progress.

It is said that ideological persuasions are the problem, and that setting these aside in the name of progress is an absolute must for the breaking of gridlock. Personally, I relish gridlock when it represents a roadblock to the intrusion of government into the private lives of its citizens. Moreover, any individual who claims ideological neutrality is self-deceived...for it is impossible for one to be something if he or she believes nothing!

Questions: Isn't ascertaining the cause of division the critical issue? If the cause is just, does this not serve as validation for the division? And if the cause is a just one, isn't the fact that division exists of little consequence? The student of scripture will discover that God himself has been the prime cause behind many a division!

The creation activity of Genesis 1 teaches us that God has been in the division business from the beginning. He divided the light from the darkness (1:4). He divided the waters and put a firmament between them (1:6-7). He divided the day from the night with two great lights "*to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness*" (1:14-18). The initial activity of the Creator set the tone for the next several millennia in that the juxtaposition of light and darkness would always be a fundamental redemptive theme!

During the confrontation between Pharaoh and Moses, the Lord sounded the division theme with these words: "*And I will put a division between my people and thy people*" (Exodus 8:20-24). The sign of division would be a *great swarm of flies* that would plague the Egyptians and avoid Goshen. The swarm came and the division was demonstrated. It signified that (1) God's people are his unique possession, and (2) the Lord has a paternal and perennial desire to protect them and deliver them from the bondage this world would impose.

The desires of God and man regarding division are often in conflict. Consider the post-exodus pause at the Red Sea. The Lord instructed Moses to stretch his rod over the sea in order to *divide* it as preparation for Israel to cross over on dry ground (14:16). But Pharaoh said: "*I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil...*" (Exodus 15:9). God and Pharaoh had conflicting ideas about what would be divided. We all know who won that conflict! The OT writers would often remind Israel of this event. Likewise you and I should never forget nor take for granted the great dividing of spiritual waters that brought us out of darkness into the marvelous light of the Lord Jesus!

The guidance given by the Lord to Moses concerning the tabernacle contained this instruction: "*And thou shalt hang up the veil...and the veil shall divide unto you between the holy place and the most holy*" (Exodus 26:33). The one piece of furniture in the most holy place was the Ark of the Covenant where the high priest, who alone was allowed to enter, sprinkled the blood of sacrifice upon the mercy seat. The division established by

the veil reinforced the truth of God's holiness in contradistinction to the sinfulness of man. Oh wonder of wonders that the veil of division was torn in two when the blood of Christ was shed for our sins (Luke 23:45), enabling every believer since that hour to enter with boldness into the holiest (Hebrews 10:19). The same God that ordained the veil division abolished it in the fulness of time.

Human logic might conclude that God robed in human flesh would be able to navigate the intricacies of human affairs without causing the first instance of strife or division. But that logic would be wrong! Jesus often caused divisions by words he spoke and miracles he performed (John 7:43, 9:16, 10:19). Righteousness personified was constantly causing rifts and catching flack. Jesus stated the essence of his earthly ministry in these unambiguous terms: "*Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division*" (Luke 12:51). He further predicted the potential division of households: fathers against sons, mothers against daughters, mothers in law against daughters in law. Jesus was no troublemaker! His divine and sinless life was one that exemplified the inevitable tension that is fomented when the forces of light and darkness collide.

At the Last Supper, Jesus took the cup, gave thanks, and said to his disciples: "*Take this, and divide it among yourselves*" (Luke 22:17-18). The fruit of the vine symbolized his precious blood, which he would shed for the remission of sins. By this act, Jesus was extending the very essence of his life to each disciple. And at this hour, the exalted Christ is still in the business of dividing a measure of the power of his atoning blood unto every sinner who comes unto God by him! For this and the aforementioned causes he shall ever be the God who divides!

## The Gospel-Centric Life

The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is the grandest message ever to fall upon human ears. At its very core is the Cross upon which Jesus died—a death that provided (1) a total satisfaction Godward for transgressions against his law, and (2) an acceptable substitution manward in terms of the justice every sinner deserves for violations of that law. Could there be a better news flash than that of a loving God providing a sin solution for all mankind and offering forgiveness and life eternal to every man and woman who believes it?

The word “gospel” is the Greek **euaggelion**, meaning “a good announcement, glad or good tidings.” It is found seventy-seven (77) times in the Greek NT. The apostle Paul accounts for fifty-eight (58) of those usages. Eleven (11) are found in the book of Romans—his most prolific epistolary usage. It goes without saying that Paul made it a dominant theme in his theological discourse.

The book of Romans represents the mother load of Paul's theological thought where the gospel is concerned. It is therefore no surprise to find him referring to the gospel four times within the first eighteen verses (1:1-18). It is inarguable that Paul was gospel-centric in all of his living—a centrality that spilled over into his writing! Let us examine those four introductory references.

First, the apostle Paul was separated unto it (1:1). *Separated* is **aphorizo**, meaning “to mark off by boundaries, to limit, to set apart for a specific purpose.” It is a perfect passive participle in nominative case. An expanded translation: “Paul, one having been permanently separated by God unto the gospel.” It might be stated as “once separated, always separated.” Our English “horizon” comes from its root. As far as Paul could see on his life's horizon, he saw a servant of God inseparable from gospel ministry. Oh what a vision! Do you and I share that same sense of separation?

Secondly, he was serving in it (1:9). *Serve* is **latreuo**, meaning “to serve for hire, to render religious service as an extension of worship.” The present tense signifies the durative quality of service. In Paul's mind, the gospel service he rendered was an outworking of his worship. He was working out in service what God was working in as a result of worship. Worship and service are inseparable. Show me a man or woman who worships the Lord Jesus and I'll show you an individual engaged in gospel enterprise on a discernable level.

Thirdly, he was ready to preach it (1:15). *Ready* is **prothumos**, a combination of **pro** (“before”) and **thumos** (“eager”). We get our English word “thermos” from its root. Paul's readiness to preach the gospel at Rome was spawned by a residual spiritual heat that predisposed him to do so. You might say that Paul's spiritual oven was “pre-heated” to a temperature conducive to evangelism!

It is entirely possible for a child of God to cool down in his or her readiness. Paul told Timothy to “*stir up* [fan the flames of] *the gift*” that was in him for a reason (2 Timothy 1:6). The challenges the young pastor dealt with daily tended to deprive his spiritual fire of oxygen. Every pastor can relate. A few typical criticisms: He spends too much time in

study...or not enough. He spends too much time visiting...or not enough. His pulpit manner is too abrasive...or too tame. He is too emotional...or too laid back. He spends too much time with one group to the neglect of others. The list goes on infinitum!

By the very nature of their task and individual giftedness, pastors can garner a lot of baseless criticism. Throw in the setbacks incurred by mankind at large and you have a myriad of potential readiness killers. If you're reading this, I suspect your readiness has made the obituaries more than once—whether pastor or layperson. It is rather remarkable that Paul, who suffered multiple shipwrecks, beatings and imprisonments, was able to keep himself in a chronic state of gospel readiness!

Fourthly, he was unashamed of it (1:16). *Ashamed* is **epaischunomai**, a combo of **epi** (“upon”, intensive prefix) and **aischuno** (“to disfigure, dishonor, suffuse with shame”). The tense is present, middle voice. An expanded translation: “I continue to be void of any shamefacedness whatsoever with regard to the gospel of Christ.” Basic to his unflinching resolve was the *power* (Gk. **dunamis**, Eng. “dynamite”) of the gospel to save the sinners who believe it! Paul was no more ashamed of the gospel than a sailor would be of the life preserver he tossed to his fellow seaman who had been washed overboard in the midst of the ocean!

The apostle Paul was a gospel-centric man. And regarding that gospel, he was separated unto it, serving in it, ready to preach it, and unashamed of it. Such are the basic attributes of the gospel-centric life. Are they ours?

## The Finishers Hall of Fame

Now that the 2009 NFL season has officially ended, aficionados of professional pigskin will begin to ask afresh whether its iron man Brett Favre will announce that he too is finished. Whether this year or next, Favre will have played his final game and finished one of the great NFL careers. After the obligatory five years for eligibility, he will no doubt be a first-ballot inductee into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

The Word of God makes no mention of a Hall of Fame for believers although Hebrews 11 is often referred to as the Hall of Faith. It does, however, have much to say about finishers and finishing. One of the greatest accolades that God can bestow upon an individual is that he or she finished the tasks that were assigned. If a Finishers Hall of Fame did exist, there are several folks that would be first-ballot inductees. Let's consider a few.

The Lord Jesus Christ would top the list. At the end of creation week, we're told that *"the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them"* (Genesis 2:1). We know this was the first of his many finished works in that *"all things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made"* (John 1:3). This fact was reiterated by Paul: *"For by him [his dear Son] were all things created"* (Colossians 1:15). One only needs to use his or her innate powers of observation to see the grandeur, vastness and precision of the finished work of creation...the pinnacle of which was man. Christ the Creator was a Finisher of the first order!

Four or so millennia later the Christ of creation assumed the role of God Incarnate. Early on Jesus stated to his disciples the purpose for which he came: *"My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work"* (John 4:34). He reaffirmed that mission to his critics: *"the works which the Father hath given me to finish, the same works...I do"* (5:36). At the end of his ministry, he prayed: *"Father...I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do"* (17:1-4). Three years of glorification by means of teaching, preaching, miracle working and holy living were finished. The perfect Lamb of God was thus prepared to offer himself as the sacrifice for our sins. The mind of man is incapable of comprehending the dire consequences that would have been incurred by sinners (and for that matter, the Godhead) if that work had been left undone.

Jesus went on to finish his redemptive work. In his final words, he cried: *"It is finished"* (19:30). The perfect tense signified a one-time redemptive act that would stand for all time! Apart from a resurrection from the dead as validation of that sacrifice, nothing else would ever be required as a basis for redemption. Jesus paid it all! We simply appropriate by faith the eternal benefits of that finished work. And in order for us to finish our race successfully, we must keep our eyes on Jesus—the *Author* and *Finisher* of our faith (Hebrews 12:2).

The Bible affirms that Moses was a finisher, having brought to completion (1) the tabernacle, and (2) the writing of the first five books of scripture. The Lord provided a bevy of detail about the tabernacle design, furniture and its configuration. Moses

recruited artisans to build its components as instructed. In Exodus 39:32, we are told: *"Thus was all the work of the tabernacle finished."* And again: *"Moses finished the work"* (40:33). In addition, Moses *"made an end of writing the words of this law in a book, until they were finished"* (Deuteronomy 31:24). Few men have finished so well with such great responsibilities placed upon their shoulders!

Solomon was a finisher. His father David desired to build a temple for the Lord, but was prohibited from doing so. Solomon inherited that task. He completed the temple in seven years, and offered *"burnt offerings and peace offerings"* to the Lord three times a year until the house was *finished* (1 Kings 6:38; 9:25). The Bible mentions several times that he *finished* the house. In 2 Chronicles 7:11, 8:16 we are twice told that he *built* and *finished* both the house of the Lord and his own house...IN THAT ORDER! Nowadays many professing Christians spend their best energies establishing their own houses, and then (maybe) get around to kingdom endeavors.

The apostle Paul was a finisher. He spoke these words to the saints at Ephesus: *"But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy"* (Acts 20:24). And as he awaited execution in Rome, he affirmed: *"I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith"* (2 Timothy 4:7). The ultimate reward for any disciple is to meet the Lord face-to-face as a finisher!

Our last finisher is an unseemly one. But he is a classic finisher with a success rate of one-hundred percent. His name is sin! James teaches us: *"Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death"* (1:15). While lust is a prerequisite to sin, it is by no means a guarantee that sin will follow. Sin is the offspring of a conception that takes place when lust is impregnated by the will. Its gestation period is closer to nine seconds than nine months. Sin's birth and the death of its perpetrator are virtually simultaneous! For a believer, it is the death of fellowship and dulling of the spiritual senses. For an unbeliever, it is one more nail in the coffin of conscience as he or she travels the road that leads to eternal separation from God.

The Finishers Hall of Fame consists primarily of biblical heroes. But there is that one noxious exception that continues to be the ruin of many. May we determine afresh to emulate the Lord Jesus as our Finisher-in-Chief and the other finishers who completed their assigned tasks. What has the Lord assigned to you? This much is certain: the words "well done, thou good and faithful servant" are reserved for finishers...and finishers alone!

## The Master Potter

The biblical imagery of the potter is one that has endeared itself to many. The potter is the ultimate hands-on artisan, working with pliable clay upon a rotating platform to give tangible expression to a unique (and often one-of-a-kind) design that flows from his mind. In like manner, our heavenly Father, the Master Potter, has in mind a spiritual design for each of his own. No child of God is in a better or safer place than the one who has submitted to the Potter for the imposition of that wise design.

The text of Isaiah 64:8 expresses the proper attitude toward the Potter: "*But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou art our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand.*" The context has Isaiah pleading for a fresh manifestation of God's presence—a presence that would cause the mountains to flow down and the surrounding nations to tremble (64:1-2). What he was requesting had historical precedent (64:3). The church at this dark hour should never forget that, while Pentecost was a one-time event, Pentecost-like demonstrations of Holy Ghost power are a real possibility for "*him [them] that waiteth for him*" (64:4).

The problem with Israel was that they were a collective lump of clay laden with defects: unclean, filthy rags for righteousness, fading leaves, blown away by iniquity, prayerless and apathetic (64:6-7). The remedy was finding a new joy in righteousness and the doing of it, and a calling to mind of the ways of the Lord (64:5). The prophet spoke as a proxy for God's people. He was aware they were in a world of hurt (64:10-11), but made his appeal for a turnaround on the basis of relationship: "*Behold, see, we beseech thee, we are all thy people*" (64:9). His use of "*we*" teaches us that leaders who desire deliverance must first identify with and own the defects. Seldom if ever will a sin-ridden, lukewarm Laodicean church experience a spiritual awakening unless it first begins with repentance in the heart of its pastor!

In 1982, while living in Iowa, I had the opportunity to visit with a real-life potter named Carl Christiansen. He showed me his kiln where he had recently fired some pieces. His shop contained both motorized and foot-driven platforms. He demonstrated both, and then called attention to a few finished vessels. He was especially proud of his "drip-free" pitchers, which he claimed were capable of the perfect pour.

At the end of my visit, he pointed to the blanket of clay dust that covered the concrete floor, and said: "Preacher, the amazing thing about this dust is that I could, at any time, sweep it up, mix it with a little water, slap it on the wheel, and mold a new vessel." His words were indelibly etched in my mind! For in my spiritual walk since that hour, I have become that trodden-under-foot clay dust that lacked water. But I've learned that a cleansing from sin and fresh dose of living water puts me back on the wheel, in the Potter's hands, and ready to be used again!

It is clear to me that that is exactly what the prophet Isaiah envisioned for Israel and for which he petitioned his God. Paraphrase: "Lord, we're mired in a spiritual mess...and I'm part of that mess. Let your mountain-melting presence descend upon us and purge our defects! Restore the loving and doing of righteousness. Reacquaint us with your ways.

We desire to reassume our place on your pottery wheel, and to be fashioned according to your good pleasure! Oh God, please make it so!" Has your walk with God turned into a blanket of clay dust? Do you desire to hear the Potter's wheel turn once again? Then I would encourage you to take the heart-felt essence of Isaiah's petition to the throne of grace as your own...and then buckle your seatbelt!

The prophet Jeremiah embraced the Potter analogy as well. The Lord sent him to a potter's house to observe his work and receive an instructive word (18:1-3). Jeremiah saw a clay vessel marred in the hands of the potter, who then took the same lump and began to "*make it again another vessel*" (18:4). The Lord applied the episode to himself as the Potter and to Israel as the clay (18:5-6). In 18:6-10, he explained that the presence or absence of evil would be the criteria for the disposition of a vessel. There were no arbitrary outcomes. The clay itself would determine its future based on its reaction to God's Word. Thus a nation God had scheduled for destruction, if it turned from evil, would be able to dodge the bullet. Contrariwise, a nation scheduled for building and planting, if it opted for evil, would forfeit the good that God intended.

In 19:11, Jeremiah adds: "*Even so will I break this people [Israel] and this city [Jerusalem], as one breaketh a potter's vessel that cannot be made whole again.*" The implication is that, up to a point, a flawed vessel can indeed be made whole again. The point of no return is reached after (1) the vessel is fired and the intense heat exposes its flaws, or (2) the potter deems the lump to be of such poor quality that it is unfit for firing. It is obvious that vessels that fail in the fire have no future on the wheel.

In Revelation 2:27, Jesus gave this promise to those at Thyatira who overcame the depths of satanic opposition: "*And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers.*" The word *potter* is the Greek **keramikos** (Eng. "ceramic"), an adjective that modifies *vessels*. Literally, "the belonging-to-a-potter vessels." Vessels belonging to a potter are subject to any number of reworks up until the time they reach the aforementioned points of no return. The derivation of "ceramic" from the root suggests a post-firing scenario. The blessed element in the Thyatiran promise is that a *ruling over* the enemies of Christ assumes that one is *reigning with* Christ!

Brethren, take courage in the Potter. Wait patiently for him. Trust his wise design. If you happen to find yourself sprawled out on the floor as clay dust, take the appropriate steps to realign yourself with the Potter and get back on his wheel! Submission to the will of the Master Potter is the wisest move a saint can make!

## Vital Church Functions

The church of Jesus Christ is the most important entity on earth. It is the light of the world, and the salt of the earth. Moreover, it is the bride of Christ, the temple of God, and a kingdom of priests. Its members are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. Its resources are supernatural, its privileges sacred, and its future secure. The Lord Jesus Christ, its Builder, makes it viable. The Holy Spirit, who inhabits the lively stones of the building, makes it venerable. As custodian of the oracles of God, it is immeasurably valuable.

The NT word "church" is the Greek **ekklesia**, meaning "called-out assembly." In the KJV, it is used eighty (80) times in singular form and thirty-seven (37) in plural form for a total of 117 occurrences. A dozen or so of these usages have in view the universal body. But its primary usage refers to a local church or group of churches that meet in specific geographical locations. The primary applicability of NT church truth is local, not universal!

The *universal* body of Christ is currently a *general* assembly (Hebrews 12:23) that, unlike its local counterpart, has never gathered itself together into one place. The church universal (or general) will not have the credentials of a full-fledged NT church (an assembly of called-out ones) until the Rapture, at which time both the dead and alive in Christ shall be caught up (gathered) together to meet him in the air (I Thessalonians 4:16-17). When the apostle Paul—the subject matter expert on church truth—told the saints at Corinth that they were "*the body of Christ, and members in particular*" he was referring to the local church at Corinth...not some unidentifiable or abstract body of believers that has yet to assemble itself (I Corinthians 12:27).

The local church has many functions, among which three are vital. Function One: Agency for Discipleship. In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus gave what is commonly called the Great Commission. The imperative given by our Lord was to "*teach*" or "*make disciples*." He employed three participles to modify the command. All three carry the force of the imperative. *Go* appears to be a command in the KJV, but is actually a past participle in passive voice. Slavish translation: "having been made to go into all the world, make disciples of all nations." Did Jesus anticipate that His church, endowed with Holy Ghost power, would be driven into a dying world with the message of life even as the Spirit drove him into the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry?

The remaining two participles—*baptizing* and *teaching*—are both present tense, active voice. These ongoing activities work in tandem to fulfill God's sanctifying purpose for those who believe on Jesus in response to the Gospel. This commission is indeed weighty, and rests squarely upon the shoulders of the local church. She has been singularly tasked to carry out the Master's mandate! Let's face it. If we are not discipling, we are dying!

Function Two: Repository of Truth. In Romans 3:1-2, Paul explained that the Jews were greatly advantaged in that the oracles of God had been committed unto them. The safekeeping and stewardship of that truth has now become the domain of the local NT

church. In Paul's exhortation to Timothy, he identified it as "*the pillar and ground of the truth*" (I Timothy 3:15). A *pillar* is a column that supports the superstructure. A *ground* is literally a foundation or basis that provides strength and stability for all that rests upon it. Many expositors believe Paul had in mind the temple of the Ephesian goddess Diana...an edifice renowned for its jewel-studded columns and awe-inspiring superstructure. In Paul's mind, however, all the glories of this world paled in comparison to truth!

Truth is the most precious of commodities. Jesus said: "*And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free*" (John 8:32). There is no greater freedom than a deliverance from the bondage of sin. Again, Jesus prayed: "*Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth*" (John 17:17). The process of sanctification is the highway to holiness. The truth is God's sanctifying agent, which he has vouchsafed to the church. The one and only hope for a lost world is the proclamation and distribution of that truth by its custodian.

Function Three: Habitation of the Living God (I Timothy 3:15). The title "*living God*" has an instructive biblical background. It is found 31 times in Scripture: 15 in the OT, 16 in the NT. Its first usage is in Deuteronomy 5. That context has Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai with God's awesome presence at the summit. There the law was dispensed, accompanied by God's audible voice, a consuming fire, deafening thunder, and a nation fearful for their lives in the presence of God's manifested glory!

In 5:26, they asked: "For who is there of all flesh, that hath heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of the fire as we have, and lived?" After 400 years of exposure to an amalgam of lifeless Egyptian deities, Israel encountered a living God Who does indeed speak to sinners, and allows them to live! He is a God of glory and greatness who inspires awe in those to whom He reveals Himself. It is important to see that "the living God" was a title first ascribed to Him by men.

This lends added significance to its first NT usage. In Matthew 16:16, Peter affirmed that Jesus was "*The Christ, the son of the living God.*" He had experienced God in the flesh...a truth revealed to him by the Father. From his OT background, Peter was essentially saying this: "The living God Who revealed Himself to our forefathers was powerful in presence, thundering in speech, awe-inspiring in His acts, and compassionate to sinners! You're just like Him! You must be His Son!" Brethren, this is the God who desires to manifest himself in the church!

These three vital functions belong to the local church. How can her pastors stand behind the pulpit without expository fire? Why does our preaching sound like an academic lecture series...and our pulpit praying like admonitions to the congregation rather than addresses to the God of heaven? Why must lost souls in search of a living God visit our churches to find instead a lifeless routine? It's high time for these functions to become a reality once again!

## Where from Here?

These are tough economic times in America. Across our nation are thousands of families who are either facing foreclosure or dealing with its aftermath. Former two-income families are down to one...or none. Positive cash flows have been replaced with red ink. Many churches, especially the smaller variety, have experienced severe drop-offs in tithes and offerings, and now wonder how long they will be able to continue paying their pastors and staff. As is too often the case, financial problems can foment spiritual and emotional woes as well. There are literally millions out there who are asking, "Where from here?"

I readily confess from my own life experience that I've asked that question on numerous occasions...often with tears. All of us make decisions that produce negative consequences. At times we incur trouble that is not of our own making. In any case, life can lead us to that proverbial chasm between a rock and a hard place...from which our soul cries out, "Where from here?" There are several men in scripture whose experiences enable us to derive guidance and encouragement for those bewildering chasms of life.

The first is Samson (Judges 16:21-30). I am certain that, not long after this former champion got settled into the Philistine prison (and perhaps before the blood dried in his empty eye sockets), he was asking this very question. I wonder how many times he reflected upon his former triumphs and the power he enjoyed by divine dispensation. Those days were gone! All that remained were memories of better times and a future with darkness written all over it! Does that sound familiar?

In time, the answer came. As the Philistines made sport, he poured out his heart to God for one last anointing to repay his enemies. Samson would go to his death with a fresh anointing of power! Death with an anointing was the answer to "Where from here?" His options: (1) die with a fresh dose of divine power, or (2) keep grinding in the prison house. He deemed death to be the better option. Better to die with an anointing than to continue to live without one! Whatever our circumstances may be, a similar attitude will serve us well! It turns out Samson killed more Philistines in death than he did in life. What if, for you and I, the parallel reality was souls saved instead of Philistines dead? Is that a "Where?" we could live with?

The second is Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:1-7). He was Judah's most godly king. On a given day when he was very sick due to a boil, God sent the prophet Isaiah to deliver a death notice. The answer to "Where from here?" was provided...but not accepted. The king turned his face toward the wall, and began to petition his God for mercy. Within a matter of minutes, the Lord sent his prophet back to Hezekiah's bedside with an updated future that included healing and fifteen additional years! Takeaway: As long as a child of God has prayer as a spiritual weapon, his or her future can be mended and extended!

The third is the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-24). Having wasted his inheritance on riotous living, he became a caretaker of swine...a grotesque task for any Jew. What he had envisioned as greener pastures had become aromatic pig slop. He clearly had thoughts

of "Where from here?" He finally reasoned: "*I will arise and go to my father.*" Rather than perish from hunger, the son came home, confessed his sin, and requested to be made a hired servant. But the father would have none of it. His son was still a son...and he would ever love him and treat him as such! The father welcomed him back with the open arms of compassion, forgiveness, a kiss, a robe, footwear and a feast. Dear friend, if the lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and or the pride of life ever bring you to a "Where from here?" moment, the Prodigal has taught us by example exactly where "Where?" is...and what we can expect from the Father upon our return!

The fourth is Jeremiah (38:4-13). After sinking in the mire at the prison dungeon's bottom, this heavy-hearted prophet may have considered that his ministry was over, and perhaps asked "Where from here?" After all, he had neither food nor water, and it was the expressed desire of the princes who falsely accused him to see him die. The answer came in the form of Ebedmelech, an Ethiopian eunuch who pled his cause before king Zedekiah, and received permission to assemble a thirty-man rescue party.

The fifth is the Jewish man of Luke 10:30-36, who was robbed and beaten. As that half-dead traveler was fading in and out of consciousness, "Where from here?" might have crossed his mind a time or two. The answer came in the form of a compassionate Samaritan who bound up his wounds, provided transportation to the inn, took care of him, and covered all of his recovery expenses.

The important lesson we learn from both the Eunuch and Samaritan is that God may very well have in mind that you and I serve as the answer for a troubled soul who is asking, "Where from here?" We may not need to ask the question, but can be used of God to be the answer for someone who is! Blessed is that man or woman who obtains an answer from God concerning "Where from here?" More blessed still are those who so walk with God that they become the answer for one who is asking!

In conclusion, we see there are two kinds of individuals involved in a "Where from here?" scenario: the askers and the answers! If you are one who is asking, take comfort from Samson, Hezekiah and the Prodigal. Each teaches us that plentiful divine resources are available at moments when all hope seems to be lost! If, on the other hand, your immediate future looks sunny and bright, consider becoming the answer for one who is asking.

## Vital Signs (Part 1)--Discipline

The typical hospital emergency room takes in annually thousands of individuals who are there for any number of medical reasons. The casual observer might be inclined to gauge the seriousness of a case based on external evidence, such as lacerations, broken bones and or blood. The trained medical professional, however, knows that what lies beneath the surface is often the better measure of traumatization. These include but are not limited to pulse rate, blood pressure, blood gases, respiration, and pupil dilation—the vital signs! Thus it is possible for a patient with roughed up exterior to be in better condition than one who presents with no visible signs of trauma.

It is a perfectly legitimate exercise to measure the vital signs of a church ministry. We all know of an individual or family (perhaps ours) that joined a church based on surface observations only to discover down the road that the church was not as healthy as first thought. How is it possible to make such a determination?

In Acts 16:1-34, the scriptures provide the case history of an actual church planting. It is a narrative that lends itself to an analysis of the vital signs that were both operative and observable within the gospel team that planted the church at Philippi. Rhetorical question: Should not that which is true of the church planters be true of and replicated in the churches they plant? Any church that presents with the same vital signs exhibited by Paul and his associates is in good spiritual health without regard for other externals.

The activity of Paul's team prior to arriving at Philippi (16:1-10) demonstrates the presence of at least three vital signs of arguably the most successful church-planting team in the history of Christendom. Those vital signs are: discipline, direction, and dynamic. In this Pen article, we will examine the first vital sign: discipline.

Discipline has to do with the willingness of God's people either to abandon or embrace the traits and behaviors that will enable them to maximize their effectiveness in glorifying the Lord Jesus, leading others to a saving faith in him, and motivating fellow believers to go and do likewise. Discipline is often misconstrued as legalism as evidenced by the number of believers who cry "Foul!" at the very suggestion of self-restraint.

The purview of legalism is restricted to those things offered up as a means of saving grace beyond faith in Jesus Christ. For example, teaching that baptism is required for salvation is in fact legalism. Baptism is the initial step of discipline for a born-again believer—a public act of obedience that provides a resounding "Yes!" to these two questions: "Do you believe in the Lord Jesus with all your heart?" (Acts 8:37), and "Do you have a good conscience as a result of sins forgiven?" (I Peter 3:21).

Our text provides three clear examples of discipline. The first is Paul and his fearless determination to revisit Lystra for the fourth time where he was stoned and left for dead on a prior visit. I'm not certain whether Paul would have worn a "No Fear" T-shirt, but he clearly lived it! Paul was a disciplined man with a track record of hazarding his life for the Lord Jesus (15:26). The salvation of the lost was more critical to him than sustaining his life or its comforts! Paul was a man who lived at the highest level of discipline!

The second example is Timothy and his willingness to undergo a painful circumcision to avoid being a stone of stumbling to potential Jewish converts—a disciplinary move that speaks volumes. Does your or my openness to personal and or painful discipline extend that far? My experience has taught me that it's not that difficult for the Lord to impose a set of disciplines upon those who are predisposed to it as an extension of their submission to the Lordship of Christ. Timothy was a genuine disciple—a disciplined man in the fullest sense of the word!

The third example is the decrees ordained by the Jerusalem council and then delivered to the churches. These Spirit-sanctioned decrees consisted of prohibitions against meats offered to idols, blood, things strangled, and fornication (15:25-29). The Seventh Commandment covered sexual purity (or impurity). The other restraints were designed to avoid offence and or confusion toward potential converts. They were disciplinary in nature, not legalistic! How do you suppose the church at large would respond today (hypothetically speaking) if there was an authoritative body issuing decrees that targeted X-rated media, "Oh My God!" profanity, alcohol, tobacco, et al?

The specifics of discipline may be open to debate, but there is no denying its effectiveness. The fruits of these disciplines were churches *established* in the faith and that *increased* in number (16:5). *Established* is the Greek **stereoo**, meaning "to make solid, firm, strong." It is imperfect, passive voice. The solidification took place over time as truth coupled with discipline had its proper impact upon church members.

*Increased* is **perisseuo**, which means "to exceed a fixed number of measure." It is imperfect, active voice. The increase in churches and their memberships likewise took place over time and exceeded expectations. The active voice suggests that the disciplined life is, in and of itself, a driving force for growth! Pastoral ministry would be a snap if every congregation fully assimilated by Monday what its pastor articulated on Sunday! But we know that growth is always an over-time proposition that requires a lot of repetition.

The church that exhibits the vital sign of personal discipline is building a solid foundation for vibrant spiritual health without regard for other externals. No church can rise to its full potential without a spiritual appetite for discipline. One who wears the name disciple but rejects the imposition of discipline upon his or her life is in poor spiritual health...if indeed life exists! In the next Pen article, we'll consider the second vital sign: direction.

## Vital Signs (Part 2)--Direction

We continue our hospital emergency room analogy by considering the second vital sign that was both operative and observable within Paul's gospel team—direction. As noted in Part I, Acts 16:1-34 provides a real-life case history of a church planting. What is true of the planter should also be true of the planted. Any local church that presents with the same vital signs as those exhibited by Paul and his associates is in good spiritual health.

Direction has to do with the entity that actually calls the shots in a church ministry. In the Pauline gospel team, there was one and only one individual calling the shots and providing direction—the Holy Ghost. Fifteen years of pastoral ministry taught me that a lot of churches have self-appointed power brokers that insist on running the show and calling the shots.

At times the pastor can be that power broker. The “My Way or the Highway!” mentality is all too common in men that ought to exude a spirit of servanthood under the Lordship of Christ. Some spend their first six to twelve months in a pastorate identifying power threats, and then doing what's necessary to send them packing so they can rule the roost with minimum opposition. A church is in shaky spiritual health when the pastor is the one usurping the role of the Spirit in dictating congregational direction!

Does the name Diotrephes ring a bell? He was a prominent member of a church to which the apostle John wrote a letter and of which his friend Gaius was a member (III John). It's not clear whether he was the pastor. But we learn from John that he was the ultimate power broker. He loved to have the preeminence, was verbally abusive and accusatory, and acted as a committee-of-one in casting folks out of the church (9-10). John reckoned him an evil doer (11). Regrettably, men like Diotrephes are still around and causing havoc, especially in the lives of young preacher boys who are trying to cut their pastoral teeth.

Pastors do have a God-given authority to “*take care of*” the church in a manner befitting a husband and father who “*rules*” his own house well (I Timothy 3:4-5). The spiritual authority to “*rule over*” a church is designed to elicit obedience from members inasmuch as the man of God is tasked to “*watch for*” their souls as one “*that must give account*” (Hebrews 13:17). In 1980, I wrote in my Bible the following statement from Morgan Noyes regarding pastoral authority: “A minister can have as much authority as the truth of his message deserves—no more. That is all the authority that any minister who is concerned about his mission rather than his prestige wants.” When it comes to the matter of pastoral authority, the words of Noyes pretty much sum it up and nail it down.

Some churches have that infamous deacon who's been around since God created dirt. He's the perennial Deacon Chairman...and perhaps Church Treasurer and Sunday School Superintendant because no one else wanted those jobs. He might even consider one of his great responsibilities that of protecting the church from its pastor. I actually had one of these deacon types tell me that very thing.

The text of Acts 16:6-7 provides for us a practical view of the team's direction under its Director, the Spirit of God. Paul and his team were always in tactical planning

mode...and strategizing is fine. After all, this was the second missionary journey, the stated objective of which was to “*visit our brethren in every city...and see how they do*” (15:36). They worked their way through Syria and Cilicia, Derbe and Lystra, Phrygia and the region of Galatia with decrees in hand. I have no doubt that at every transition the Spirit infused his sanctioning peace.

But following Galatia, they were “*forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia*” (16:6). *Forbidden* is the Greek **kolyo**, meaning “to hinder or prevent, deny or refuse.” It is an aorist passive participle in nominative case. Literal translation: “they were ones having been denied their tactical plan to proceed to Asia.” The aorist suggests an abrupt slamming of the door. The Spirit imposed his will and the team got the message. There was no Asia option that the Spirit would sanction.

The tactical planning continued as they arrived in Mysia (16:7). *Assayed* is **peirazo**, meaning “to try, attempt, put to the test.” It represents a calculated attempt to ascertain the next best direction for ministry. The imperfect captures the durative nature of the planning and decision-making process. Nothing was ever decided by a coin toss. With Bithynia now in the crosshairs, the Spirit “*suffered them not.*” *Suffered* is **eo**, which means “to allow or permit one to do as he wishes without restraint.” The negative modifier indicates the opposite. The Spirit did indeed impose a restraint upon the team regarding the latest plan...and they got the message.

The same Spirit who *limited* their options *led* them on to Troas. It was there that Paul received his Macedonian vision that brought the team to Philippi. A church is perfectly within the realm of proper conduct when it assays to move forward in a logical and calculated manner. It is entirely possible for the Spirit of God to work his peace within the hearts of those engaged in the assaying process to sanction a direction. The problem arises when we insist on having it our way rather than his. Blessed is the church that is *listening* when the Spirit is *directing!*

Who's calling the shots in your church? Is it the Spirit of God...or merely the best that the minds of men can assay to do? The vital sign of direction within Paul's gospel team teaches us that even a stalwart with apostolic authority is obliged to take a seat at the feet of the Master Director, the Spirit of God. In the next Pen article, we'll consider the third vital sign: dynamic.

## Vital Signs (Part 3)--Dynamic

Our hospital emergency room analogy takes us to the third vital sign that was both operative and observable in Paul's gospel team—dynamic. As noted in Parts 1 and 2, Acts 16:1-34 provides us with the real-life case history of the church planting at Philippi. And again, what is true of church planters should also be true of the churches they plant. Any local church that presents with the same vital signs as those exhibited by Paul and his associates is in good spiritual health.

Dynamic has to do with the working relationship that exists between pastor and people, or (as we find in Acts 16) between the team leader and his co-workers. The disciplined gospel team that had embarked on this second mission journey reached Troas under the direction of the Spirit of God. After they arrive at Troas, we are made privy to the dynamic that any and every church must have in order to flourish in terms of its spiritual health.

A brief glance at a first century Bible map will show that Paul and his team moved basically west-by-northwest from Cilicia (his home turf) to Phrygia and Galatia. At Phrygia they purposed to travel due west to Asia, but the Spirit said "No!" They continued to move west-by-northwest to the region of Mysia.

Now, with the Aegean Sea to their west, they "assayed" that the next best move would be due east to Bithynia. After all, they had no plans to do any trans-Aegean travel. A retracement of the first mission journey was their stated purpose (15:36), and it did not include maritime activity on Aegean Sea. But again the Spirit said "No!" So they traveled a relatively short distance southwest to Troas on the Aegean coast.

Can you see their dilemma? At Troas, Asia (a no-go) is now to the south, Bithynia (another no-go) is to the east, no-man's land lies to the north, and the waters of the Aegean are to the immediate west. Imagine a football team in the locker room at halftime where running game, passing game and special teams have all been non-factors in the first half. For our gospel team, Troas had become that locker room...and the team was waiting for the Coach to reveal his second-half plan. By the way, the next time you find yourself at Troas with future on hold, keep in mind that it's better to be there with God than anywhere else without him!

Acts 16:9 tells us that "*a vision appeared to Paul in the night.*" A man from Macedonia, in a standing position, was beseeching Paul to come over (the waters of the Aegean) to help its inhabitants. It matters not what Paul's mental or physical state was during the vision. The fact is the team needed a plan going forward, and got exactly that in a supernatural revelation from the Coach. And here is where the dynamic comes into play!

Note the relationship between the "he" and "we" in 16:10: "*after he [Paul] had seen the vision, immediately we [co-workers] endeavored to go.*" The leader SAW it, and the team CAUGHT it! That which they CAUGHT was considered to be a CALL to preach the gospel to the Macedonians! Paul may have shared immediately what he saw, or perhaps waited until morning. In any case, there was no dogmatism in sharing it, such as: "Bless God, that's what I saw, and that's where we're going!" Paul was a wise leader, and knew

that the best course of action was to avoid acting like the Spirit and usurping his direction. He shared the vision from his heart, and allowed time for the Spirit who gave it to affirm and confirm its heavenly origin in the hearts of co-workers.

*Assuredly gathering* is the Greek **sybibazo**, meaning “to cause to coalesce, to join or put together, to unite or knit together in an affectionate manner.” The verb is a present active participle, nominative case. An expanded translation: “We...were ones who kept on considering the vision until it knit us together as one with a burden for the Macedonians.” What a dynamic! This is the confidence-building work of the Spirit as he knits together the hearts of co-workers regarding the will of God. It is a vital sign without which no church can travel very far in its service for Christ! It’s a thing of beauty when the Spirit melds together the hearts of believers with regard to a vision and its implementation. It’s especially thrilling when co-worker response is virtually immediate!

Acts 16:1-10 represents the most desirable of working relationships—a leader with gospel credibility shares a vision from God that co-workers buy into with a view to implementation. Three less-desirable scenarios are all too common. (1) The pastor has vision, but the people never catch it. (2) The pastor has no vision, but the people long for one. (3) The pastor has no vision, and the people are perfectly content to live without one. Only the first of the four is desirable. Which one is at work in your church? Bottom line: A church lacking joint participation in a heavenly vision is in poor spiritual health!

The local church that exhibits the vital signs of personal discipline, Spirit-sanctioned direction and a cooperative dynamic rooted in vision is in good spiritual health without regard for other externals. Absent these vital signs, a church, whether big or small, is a candidate for intensive care...and perhaps life support!

## The "So" Preacher

In a classroom at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary back in 1976, Dr. Jimmy Millikin was facilitating a theological discussion when one of my fellow seminarians asked him to explain what was meant by "unction" in the matter of preaching. While I cannot recall all the details of his answer, I do remember quite well the part where he made this statement: "Gentlemen, there's preachin'...and then there's PREACHIN'!"

I believe every student in that classroom understood what he meant: a homily delivered with the help of heaven! No emotion is as deflating to a preacher as walking from the pulpit knowing that the Spirit of God had no part in the sermon. Contrariwise, no emotional high can match the blessed assurance that the God of heaven SHOWED UP, that he was IN the preaching, and that he GRACED his messenger with other-worldly POWER!

It is abundantly clear that Paul and Barnabas, on the first mission journey, were well-acquainted with the latter emotion and virtual strangers to the first. The biblical text of Acts 14:1-7 describes a preaching event that took place in the synagogue at Iconium, where *"they...so spake, that a great multitude both of the Jews and also of the Greeks believed"* (14:1). Our focus is the "so" preaching of Paul and Barnabas.

Exactly what is "so" preaching? It is preaching that is impregnated with both power and passion. As they came to the city, the scripture says they were *"filled with joy, and with the Holy Ghost"* (13:52). There is no reason to believe either of these ingredients was lacking in the oratory. So is the Greek adverb **houtos**, which signifies the extent or degree to which an action is performed. It is the adverb Jesus used to describe the God that *"so loved"* the world that he gave his Son (John 3:16). At a minimum, "so" preaching means they held nothing back!

A third (and not so obvious) element in "so" preaching is that of precision. The apostle Paul wielded truth much like a surgeon would his scalpel. He would cite OT texts, build and link together irrefutable evidence, and prove the Messianic case for Christ (Acts 13:14-39). Apollos was a preacher cut out of the same mold (Acts 18:28). If precision worked for Paul and Apollos, why would any preacher want to enter the pulpit without it?

What is the formula for "so" preaching? Power + Passion + Precision = Persuasion! Luke describes the outcome in a way that would lead a reader to conclude that preaching with no "so" in it would have reduced the greatness of the multitude that believed it. What conclusion can we draw from the thousands of churches that go year after year without baptizing a single convert? I conclude that too many of America's pulpits are filled by professional and professorial types who possess neither power nor passion in whatever it is they are preaching! The late Billy Mayes is proof positive that passion alone can persuade millions to spend millions on gadgets. How much more should passion mingled with power and precision enable the "so" preacher to persuade lost men toward Christ?

Three brief observations are in order. First, "so" preaching has its detractors. In this case (as was often the case), the detractors were the unbelieving Jews (14:2). Their objective

was to evil-affect minds. Consider these related words: traction, detraction and detractor. Traction (or its lack) might form the mental image of a car spinning its tires in the mud...unable to make forward progress. In TV coverage of the 2010 winter storms, we saw vehicles abandoned at the bottom of inclines for lack of traction due to layers of snow and ice. Such a loss of traction is detraction. The detractors were essentially seeking to layer the minds of lost men with the frozen precipitation of doubt and disbelief so as to prevent the gospel from gaining traction in the minds of those who heard it.

Secondly, "so" preaching has its defenders. The foremost defender of "so" preaching is the Lord himself. In the face of fierce opposition, Jesus was on the scene to provide *signs* and *wonders* as authentication for the message (14:3). A sign points the observer to the greater divine reality behind it. A wonder is meant to create a sense of awe that will drive the observer to pursue the God who granted it. The "so" preacher, as a God-anointed irritant for his detractors, can hang around a "long time" as long as the Lord is around to validate his ministry. We are also told that "part" of the city "held with" (defended) the apostles in the division caused by the "so" preaching (14:4). There's nothing wrong with partisanship if you're in the right party!

Thirdly, "so" preaching has its dangers. In time, the unbelieving Jews and Gentiles conspired to assault Paul and Barnabas, use them spitefully, and stone them (14:5). I am inclined to believe that the spiteful use they had in mind was on the order of what Jesus endured on the eve of his crucifixion. At this point, the apostles fled the city, and lived to preach another day (14:6). Sometimes the best course of action for the "so" preacher is moving on to another venue...but not until his Defender-In-Chief gives the green light to do so.

The "so" preacher is alive and well today. But he represents a minority of the pulpit population. Frankly, a lot of churches do not want to deal with the baggage he brings. In every location where he shows up, you can count on detractors and dangers showing up as well. Blessed are those churches that have one. If your pastor is a "so" preacher, pray for him, and join the Lord Jesus as one of his defenders. And may our Lord increase his tribe!

## The Closing Argument

I have always had an affinity for movies or television programs that feature courtroom drama. Back in the day (circa 1957-1966), the TV series "Perry Mason" was considered by many to be must-see television. It certainly was at our house. It was riveting, week-after-week, to watch Mason (with the help of secretary Della Street and private investigator Paul Drake) peel back layers of the indictment onion to find exculpatory evidence for their clients. Mason would typically expose the real perpetrator in the courtroom before a case ever had a chance to go to the jury. In fact, I cannot remember a single episode where Mason had to deliver a closing argument.

One of the classic cinematographic courtroom examinations took place in the 1992 film "A Few Good Men" as Lt. Kaffee drilled Col. Jessep as to whether he had ordered a Code Red. In the heat of the exchange, Col. Jessep asked Kaffee if he wanted answers. Kaffee replied: "I want the truth!" Jessep rejoined: "You can't handle the truth!" He went on to incriminate himself by admitting to the Code Red. The military jury delivered its mixed verdict against the two accused, but Jessep's confession precluded any need for a closing argument.

Do you remember the 1997 movie "The Rainmaker"? In his first foray into the litigation arena, attorney Rudy Baylor took on a formidable insurance company in a case of wrongful death...and won! His compelling closing argument included a video clip from the insured, who later died because the company denied a legitimate claim for curative treatment. The jury's multi-million-dollar punitive award forced the company into bankruptcy.

In the real world, a well-delivered closing argument can spell the difference between acquittal and life imprisonment...or worse. Who can forget the prosecutorial 'glove' blunder in the O. J. Simpson trial? In his closing argument, defense attorney Johnnie Cochran won the day with this now-famous proposition to the jury: "If it doesn't fit, you must acquit!" And acquit they did...and set free a manifestly guilty man!

The real world of which we speak includes the spiritual realm, especially as it pertains to the adversarial tension that exists between a holy God and sinful men. In that ethereal domain, the Lord Jesus Christ serves as both Prosecutor and Judge. The Jury is a Tribunal consisting of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Is there a sinner in his right mind who would want to walk into that Courtroom without a Defender who is equal to the task?

The fact is we all have a future rendezvous with divine judgment: "*And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment*" (Hebrews 9:27). The individuals who become a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ can enter that Judgment with full assurance that the best Defense Counsel in the universe is theirs! 1 John 2:1-2 declares: "*And if any man sin, we have an advocate [Defender who pleads our cause] with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous [who rightly represents the facts in evidence as they pertain to us]: And he is the propitiation [total satisfaction] for our sins.*" William R. Newell was spot on when he penned these words back in 1895: "Oh, the love that

drew salvation's plan! Oh, the grace that brought it down to man! Oh, the mighty gulf that God did span at Calvary!"

Please allow me to offer what I consider to be sanctified imagery regarding the closing argument that the Lord Jesus, our Advocate, will deliver on my behalf: "Father, we now have Don Roberts before us. I would remind your Honor of that Fall night in 1959 when Don, having been made aware of his lost condition by the Spirit after a reading of John 3:16, slipped to his knees by his bedside and asked me to save him from his sins, and give him eternal life. I forthwith washed away his sins with my precious blood, and obliterated his sin burden.'

"Furthermore, your Honor, he was justified, regenerated by and sealed with the Spirit, predestinated to be conformed to my image, and granted, via adoption, all the benefits of sonship. We thus obligated ourselves to save him to the uttermost. He stands before this Court with no merit of his own, but with a robe of righteousness imparted to him by grace through faith. On the basis of the facts in evidence, I recommend we allow him to live with us in glory for all eternity." The Father replies: "My Son, your summation is the truth as we know it to be. The petition is granted. Judgment for the defendant!"

If you have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ to the saving of your soul, simply alter name and circumstances to make the closing argument your own! For those who persist in unbelief, and depart this life with neither regeneration nor forgiveness, the Judge shall deliver this closing argument with stunning brevity...and finality: "*I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity*" (Matthew 7:23). In 2 Corinthians 13:5, Paul challenged his readers to *examine* themselves, to see whether they were actually *in the faith*. The outcome of such an examination is determinative as to the closing argument one will hear at the Courtroom examination to come!

## A Study in Preaching (Part 1)--The Miracle

We recently published a series of articles on the Vital Signs of church ministry, and sought to make the point that the book of Acts, as an inspired historical narrative, provides valuable insight into the specifics of church planting as well as church health in general. Acts also provides a corresponding ability to identify a few of the basic by-products of apostolic preaching as seen in the "so" preaching of Paul and Barnabas at Iconium.

We now pursue a more in-depth study of preaching as we follow our "so" preachers into the regions of Lystra and Derbe, where "*they preached the gospel*" (Acts 14:7). The Greek for "preached the gospel" combines two verbs: the imperfect of **eimi** (to be) and the present middle participle of **euaggelizo** (to announce good news) in nominative case. A slavish translation: "They were ones who were continuously preaching the gospel and acting in their own interest by doing so."

The Greek verb combo teaches us three very important truths. (1) Preaching the gospel is a pattern of life for the gospel preacher. The message delivered at Iconium was the same one preached at Lystra and in every other city on the itinerary. At NO TIME did they modify the message in order to mollify hearers with more 'user-friendly' content. (2) The gospel preacher IS something before he DOES something. What they *were* was fundamental to what they *did*. Gospel preachers preach the gospel. It's hard-wired in their spiritual DNA! (3) The preacher who would touch the lives of others must first secure the touch of God upon his own life. And nothing secures the blessing of God upon a preacher like magnifying the Lord Jesus in his vicarious death and glorious resurrection! Thus is the force of the middle voice.

Now, Paul and Barnabas had shaken the dust off of their feet in Antioch of Pisidia against the adversarial Jews, and moved on to the city of Iconium...70 or so miles to the east-southeast. Luke is careful to contrast the *envy* that filled the Jews (13:45) with the *joy* and power that filled the evangelists (13:52). The detractors and dangers that emerged at Iconium precipitated a departure to Lystra and Derbe...cities located 30 miles to the southwest and southeast respectively. And there they continued to preach the gospel.

Our study in preaching derives from Acts 14:8-18. From that narrative we can identify at least three of its core characteristics. They are: the miracle that fulfills it, the mountain that faces it, and the message that fires it. In this Pen, we will consider the first of the three: the miracle that fulfills preaching.

The miracle of which we speak is the phenomenon that takes place when the PREACHED word is first HEARD and then BELIEVED! It is the preached-and-heard word that germinates in the human heart and springs forth as faith! One of the bedrock principles of scripture is that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Romans 10:17).

Most of us are familiar with the exclamation of "Yes!" accompanied by a fist pump. It's what the tennis player does after ripping a forehand cross-court to win a game, set or

match. It's what the golfer does after launching a five-iron from 190 yards that carries the front bunker and stops inches from the flag for a tap-in birdie. It might be what the software developer does after pouring over thousands of lines of code to find-fix that illusive syntax error that puts a critical program back online. For the gospel preacher, it's the jubilation and perhaps exultation that he experiences when the spoken word brings a faith response that transforms the life!

There are two miracles disclosed in our text: healing and believing. The latter is by far the greater! It is a known fact that seeing can often be the enemy of hearing, and our text provides the contrast. The impotent man "*heard Paul speak*" (14:9), but the people "*saw what Paul had done*" (14:11). Hearing resulted in faith for the one whereas seeing led to a vociferous celebration by the many that was rooted in false worship. Many of the Lycaonians were convinced that the gods had come down. But seeing void of hearing led them to connect the healing with the wrong god.

Do you suppose this is still happening today? If it's possible to attribute genuine miracles to a false god, isn't it also possible to assign fictitious miracles to the true God? It seems to me that this kind of "cross-wiring" is one of the potential pitfalls for any "healing" ministry that is heavily dependent upon tele-VISION for its revenue stream. The logic: No miracles to SEE on our end will result in fewer monies sent from the VIEWER end!

Make no mistake! The God of heaven is still in the business of granting genuine healing on earth, and should be given the glory due him for every such intervention. But the fact remains that a lot of alleged healing is attributed to him concerning which he has had no part. Scripture teaches us that there is a Satan-inspired *mystery of iniquity* already at work. It includes supernatural power manifested in the form of *signs* and *lying wonders*, but NEVER leads anyone who SEES them to fall in love with and believe the truth of the gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:7-12). For this reason, I question the auspices of any ministry that clamors over physical healing as evidence of divine power at work. It just might be a satanic counterfeit intended to misdirect VIEWERS to another Jesus, another spirit, or another gospel (2 Corinthians 11:3-4).

The primacy of preaching was captured in these words from Congregationalist preacher Henry Ward Beecher: "God had only one Son...and he made him a preacher!" No preacher worth his salt, who would follow in the steps of his Lord and those of the apostles, should ever be content to preach without apostolic power! One of the core characteristics of NT preaching is the miracle of hearing-believing that follows in its wake. It's what causes the "Yes!" to erupt in the preacher! It's what fulfills the preaching ministry like nothing else can! In our next Pen, we will examine the mountain that always faces the gospel preacher and his preaching.

## A Study in Preaching (Part 2)--The Mountain

We continue to examine the core characteristics of NT preaching as provided for us in the inspired narrative of Acts 14:8-18. We began by looking at the miracle that fulfills preaching. A man crippled from birth (defective feet), who had never walked, heard the apostle Paul preach the gospel of grace. A hearing of the truth led to a believing with the heart. And Paul, having perceived the spiritual transition that was taking place in him, issued a command for the impotent man to "Stand upright!" That which was defective became effective as he leaped and walked immediately. Thanks be unto God for the miracle of faith as a response to the preached Word!

We now shift our attention to the mountain that faces preaching. By "mountain" we refer to the obstacle that must be overcome in order for preaching to bear genuine fruit in the hearts and lives of hearers. It must be scaled and conquered, not gone around. The mountain of which we speak is the false god that has entrenched itself in the human heart. The ultimate challenge in preaching is the dethronement of that false god.

The post-miracle picture painted by Luke is one of genuine religious activity and great excitement. The people were convinced that "the gods" had come down "to us" in the likeness of men (14:11). In their minds, this was nothing less than an up close and personal encounter with deity. To use evangelical vernacular, the people were willing and ready to accept Paul and Barnabas as their personal lords and saviors!

In our study of the miracle that fulfills preaching, we observed that seeing void of hearing can result in assigning a genuine miracle to the wrong god. And now we see that false worship begets a faulty perspective. If you and I had been in that crowd, we might have wondered: "How in the world can these folks entertain a message about the Lord Jesus Christ—the One in whose name the miracle was performed—and then make the two Roman gods Jupiter and Mercury the center of their attention?" Yet the same dichotomy occurs every Lord's Day in America as good men of God, who love the truth and preach it in power, observe the members of their congregations live the other six days of the week as though Christ's lifeless bones were still in that borrowed tomb.

There are two critical observations to be made. The first: Consecration is far more vital than communication! I remember Ronald Reagan being called The Great Communicator. But to this day the Marxists who inhabit high places in our government still spit on his grave. This is because Reagan, a master of communication, was never able to alter their philosophical core. And so it is with man at his spiritual core. If there is no *dethronement* of a false god and the *enthronement* of the Lord Jesus—the supreme act of consecration—it matters not the extent to which the man of God preaches the stars down with an articulation that angels would envy!

The second is this: Gods are always revealed at the point of sacrifice. The priest of Jupiter, the local religious honcho, had rustled up some oxen and garlands to garner the approval of his gods (14:13). It is not clear whether he owned that stuff or whether he had made an appeal to the people to give a "sacrificial love offering" for the cause. One thing is certain: That for which a man or woman is willing to sacrifice is revelatory

regarding that which rules the heart! This would be a good time to reflect upon the last time you sacrificed something (time, money, self-interest, possessions, a relationship) and attach that something to the entity for which you sacrificed it. Can you attach it to the Lord Jesus? If not, why not?

I heard Dr. Bob Jones III preach a message in which he stated: "The problem with God's people today is NOT that they don't love Christ. It is that they do not love Christ ONLY!" I believe that statement, which I heard two decades ago, is as applicable today as ever. Most if not all of us have gone through spiritual valleys where we discovered, perhaps in retrospect, that the primary cause for our calamity was a divided affection where, as the Lord Jesus put it, we attempted to love-serve God plus something else (Matthew 6:24). For the child of God, the time-proven recipe for spiritual misery is an approach to life that includes two or more masters!

Now, the key difference between regeneration and revival is this: Regeneration is the dislodging of gods from the hearts of the lost whereas revival has to do with the same dislodging of gods from the hearts of believers. I often wondered in years past why churches that held "Revival Meetings" encouraged folks to bring their lost friends and neighbors. Wouldn't it be more accurate to use the phrase "Regeneration Meetings" to describe such efforts? If you want to reach the lost, bring in the Evangelist. The arduous task of awakening a lukewarm church and scaling its mountains of false gods, however, is reserved for a special breed of spiritual warrior—the Revivalist!

The next time your pastor steps to the pulpit to preach God's truth, think of him as a climber of mountains...for that is exactly what he is. The congregation he is about to address is a collective mountain range consisting of everything from foothills to Mount Everest. Pray earnestly for him as he climbs! Pray that the collapse of those mountains and the consecration of hearts will result from his communication...and pray that it begins with you! In our next Pen, we will examine the message that fires preaching.

## A Study in Preaching (Part 3)--The Message

Our study in preaching concludes with the third of three core components found in Acts 14:7-18: the message that fires preaching. The message is equivalent to preaching's bottom line in its appeal to sinners. It's the divine imperative imposed upon lost men that ignites a corresponding flame of urgency in the preacher. Paul summed it up in one four-letter word: "TURN" (14:15).

The Greek is **epistrepho**, a combination of **epi** ('upon') and **strepho** ('to turn'). The familiar phrase "Turn on a dime!" captures the meaning. The act of turning in the gospel sense is inevitably from something ('vanities') to someone ('the living God'). *Vanities* contrasts the emptiness derived from the false with the fullness that the true God alone can supply. Implicit in *living* as applied to God is the lifeless existence of those who embrace the false. The lost person who turns to the Lord Jesus from whatever god is occupying the throne of his or her heart has literally everything to gain and nothing to lose!

The late great A. W. Tozer identified the two basic gospel tenets—repent and believe—in terms of the SHIFT and the GIFT. Preaching of apostolic caliber must give equal deference to both. Recently I heard a prominent preacher remark that, as far as his ministry was concerned, he was going to leave the preaching of hellfire and brimstone to others. "There's plenty of that kind of stuff going on out there!" he said. "I'm going to spend my time encouraging and loving people, emphasizing the positive and avoiding the negative!"

Now, if the apostle Paul had been sitting in that television studio, how do you suppose he would have reacted to that mindset? I believe he would have called him on the proverbial carpet and rebuked him for failure to preach the whole counsel of God! When Paul admonished the Lycaonians to turn from their vanities, he was clearly setting forth a SHIFT as coincident with the GIFT! Only God knows how many folks feel as though they have been GIFTED with life eternal although they have never really SHIFTED their allegiance to the Lord Jesus!

Three comments are in order. First, observation breeds reaction. One can sense the visceral urgency of Paul and Barnabas as they saw themselves become the objects of worship and intended recipients of sacrifice. Most of us have heard a story about torrential rains that washed out a section of bridge and the individual who, armed with that awareness, stood in the face of traffic crying "Stop!" in an effort to deter them from plunging into a watery grave. The "Turn!" message that fires preaching deals with consequences far more catastrophic!

Remember Paul at Athens? The scripture says that his spirit was "*stirred*" (stimulated, irritated, provoked) in him when he saw the city *wholly given to idolatry* (Acts 17:16). It's one thing to master biblical facts and win theological arguments. It's quite another to witness first-hand the debilitating effects of sin upon the human condition and resolve to do something about it! Are you a preacher whose fire has diminished and whose sense of urgency has waned? Why not suspend your administrative role for a season, get into

the neighborhood with a New Testament and some gospel tracts, and allow yourself to be stirred afresh by the spiritual decadence that surrounds you?

Secondly, preachers foment trouble with messages, not miracles. Miracles are no threat to mountains. By the miracle, the mountain was revealed. But by the message, the mountain was rebuked! Typically, lost men are not offended by the miraculous. It is the "Turn!" message that poses the real threat to whatever it is other than Jesus that reigns in the heart!

The earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus clearly demonstrated this truth. Thousands followed him relentlessly across the land in awe of his disease- and death-defying power. But when he assigned exclusivity to himself as *the way, the truth and the life*, and proclaimed the impossibility of coming to the Father *except* through him (John 14:6), the relentless relented. Desires to "Crown Him!" gave way to demands to "Crucify Him!"

Thirdly, preaching messages with spiritual fire can be fatal. Walking and preaching in Holy Ghost power did not preclude a stoning by the malevolent Jews and complicit Mercury- and Jupiter-worshipping throngs. One of the classic traits of scripture is that of full disclosure. The text of Acts 14:7-18 bids the would-be preacher to consider the possibility that shift-and-gift preaching, while having the potential to endear him to many, can be infuriating to some. If there is any consolation to be found in the stoning of Paul, it is the distinct possibility that God just might not be finished with his preacher even though men are! God resurrected Paul for that very reason! And he's still in the business of resurrecting the ministries of preachers who, for whatever reason, appeared to be down for the count!

The relevant question for the twenty-first century church is NOT "Do we have a message?" but rather "Does the message have us?" Our study in preaching has demonstrated that the gospel was a message that literally owned the apostle Paul. It was a message that spawned miracles and exposed mountains. It's the message that should be a smoldering fire within each of us who believe inasmuch as we are tasked to preach it to every creature!

## So Little for So Long Time

Every single question that Jesus directed toward men in His earthly ministry contained at least three inherent qualities: (1) Each one was intended to foster the apprehension of spiritual truth in the recipients. (2) They were always penetrating and thought provoking in nature, challenging the hearer to reason his or her way to the proper conclusion and, as a result, undertake an appropriate course of action. (3) None of them were asked for the purpose of acquiring information.

A prime example is found in Luke 6:46 where Jesus was addressing His newly-appointed apostles, a group of disciples from whom He had chosen the Twelve, and a great multitude of people who had sought Him out for both teaching and healing (6:17-19). He asked the following rhetorical question: "*And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?*" The spiritual truth to be apprehended was the inconsistency of saying one thing and doing another, giving lip service to His authority while disregarding His directives. This kind of asynchronous alignment of lips and life is the very essence of hypocrisy. If someone on the receiving end of that question reasons that he or she is playing the hypocrite, the challenge would be to undertake a life of obedience that reflects a genuine recognition of His Lordship and brings the lips and life into agreement.

A less well-known but equally penetrating question was directed toward the apostle Philip on the eve of our Lord's crucifixion. Jesus said to him: "*Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip?*" (John 14:9). In the context, Jesus was engaged with the apostles (minus Judas Iscariot) in perhaps the most intensive and comprehensive teaching interlude of His ministry. Simon Peter and Thomas had raised both questions and doubts about where Jesus was going and the way to get there. Jesus in turn affirmed that He was the way to the Father, and that knowing Him was the equivalent of knowing the Father.

At that point, Philip interjected, saying: "*Lord, shew us the Father, and it sufficeth us*" (14:8). The statement implied that Philip was not satisfied with Jesus alone. Even though he used the pronoun "us" in articulating his desire, I doubt that he spoke for the entire group. I believe John, the beloved apostle, had arrived at Jesus-alone satisfaction long before this conversation took place.

The question posed by Jesus to one of His elect servants lends itself to our encouragement and instruction in the following four ways. First, notice that when responding to both Peter (13:36-38) and Thomas (14:7-8), the Lord did not employ a personal address. But He addressed Philip by name...in part to signify the personal attention He was giving to the issue raised by Philip, and in part as an expression of His tenderness and concern for one in whom He had invested so much.

Secondly, the knowledge vacuum of which Jesus spoke was relative rather than absolute. In other words, Philip knew the Lord Jesus in terms of a saving relationship, but his spiritual perception of Christ had not advanced to the maximum extent warranted by three years of exposure and interaction. Thirdly, since the phrase "*so long time*"

equates to a three-year period for Philip, why not assume for present-day purposes that three year-old converts who still exhibit spiritual dullness, and lack Jesus-alone steadfastness, have suffered in their spiritual advancement? Lastly, we may conclude that knowing Jesus to the fullest extent possible in this life is the most noble and rewarding pursuit than can be undertaken by a sinner saved by grace!

Brethren, I wonder whether that penetrating question Jesus directed toward Philip in those precious hours before His arrest and trial might have some thought-provoking relevance for you and me at this hour. How long has Jesus been with us or (to be more Biblically correct) in us? Has it been three days, three months, three years, or three decades? To what extent have we advanced in our theological as well as experiential knowledge of Him? Do we live with a Jesus-alone satisfaction? Or can we hear the Lord Jesus addressing us by name in our heart of hearts, admonishing us that for so long time we have come to apprehend so little about His magnificent Person and matchless grace?

## Care Management

On a 24-7-365 basis, our nation's Air Traffic Controllers monitor-manage the flow of air traffic within the airspaces for which they are responsible. The combined radar footprint of hundreds of control towers is so extensive that seldom if ever does an aircraft fail to show up on one or more radar screens. It's "game on" for a controller when a new blip (aircraft signature) appears on screen.

Modern black-box technology enables the controller to ascertain airspeed, compass heading, altitude, rate of climb-descent and other valuable data. A red flag of concern is raised anytime a controller determines that two aircraft are on flight paths that will inevitably intersect unless altered. The potential remedy may consist of altitude and heading adjustments for one or both of the aircraft. The point is these radar blips represent genuine items of concern that must be managed!

In like manner, we as God's children have spiritual radar that runs 24-7-365. The blips that come across our screens represent items of daily (or perhaps perennial) concern. We might liken some to a single-engine two-seater requiring minimum attention. Others are more like the jumbo jet (a "heavy" in tower lingo) with a lot more people, baggage and potential mayhem. All of these cares, however, without regard for size and scope, must be managed in the manner our Lord prescribes.

The biblical prescription for care management is as follows: "*Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time; casting all your care upon him, for he careth for you*" (1 Peter 5:6-7). Peter's target audience consisted of spiritual pilgrims who were suffering at the hands of an abusive Roman government that was exacerbating the cares of God's people beyond those of the average citizen. Those who pay attention can discern the rising tide of anti-Christian sentiment in our national leadership that is certain to ultimately and negatively impact believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, what does Peter teach us about care management? First, it's a matter of positioning...and we all know that position is everything (e.g., IN Christ or IN Adam; UNDER law or UNDER grace). The believer is enjoined to position himself UNDER the mighty hand of God. In a context of suffering, the *mighty* (Gk. **kratos**, explosive power) hand of God is juxtaposed with that of Rome. Peter is assuring readers that NO government, no matter how abusive, can EVER put God at disadvantage when it comes to caring for his own! At the end of the day, the mighty hand of God will always trump the heavy hand of man!

The Greek for "humble yourselves" is **tapenoo** ("to make low or level"). Humbling oneself is impossible apart from the prescribed positioning. In addition to being an imperative, it is aorist (past) tense and passive voice. The aorist in imperative mode signifies the need to start doing something that is not being done. It sounds to me like Peter was telling them that many of their troubles were directly attributable to bad positioning. The passive voice signifies the need to have something done to them rather than just doing something. Peter is saying: "Stop managing your cares in your own

strength and start positioning yourselves under the mighty hand of the God who desires to shelter you there. Let God be God!"

I'll be the first to admit that this is easier said than done! So why do it? The *therefore* provides the answer as it points to the previous verse: "*God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble*" (5:5). That truth clearly defines our two options: encounter God's resistance or entertain his grace? Is this not a no-brainer? Absolutely...and exactly the response Peter was seeking to elicit!

Secondly, it's a matter of unloading. The imperative is modified by a participial phrase: "*casting all your care.*" *Care* is an all-inclusive singular. *Casting* is actually an aorist (past) participle. *Careth* as applied to God is present tense, active voice. Expanded translation: "Having cast your every care and anxiety upon the God who continuously cares for you, take your place under his mighty hand." There is no humbling without unloading, and no unloading without positioning!

*Casting (having cast)* is more a prerequisite for humbling than a concurrent activity. A cognizance of such non-stop care from the Lord is what motivates the believer to cast all of his or her "stuff" upon the Caregiver! The more "stuff" we incur, the more we must unload. The more we unload, the more humble we become! Thus humility and prayer are inseparable! Moreover, we must never forget that our God does not stop caring if and when we stop casting! His paternal nature compels him to care! That's what he does!

Thirdly, it's a matter of timing. The end game for humility is an exalting (a raising or lifting up) of the humble in *due time*. Whatever "due time" means, it clearly signifies GOD's time on HIS schedule! It also means that, in ALL matters pertaining to God's people as they endure hardships in this life, the God under whose mighty hand they position themselves will have the FINAL WORD!

Care management consists of a proper positioning, a consistent unloading, and a firm reliance upon the timing of God to bring his purposes to pass. For Elijah, due time was a death-free chariot ride to heaven. For Joseph, it was a promotion to the second highest position in Egypt. For Daniel, it was a case of lockjaw for a den of lions. For Stephen, it was a vision of the Son of God standing at the right hand of the Father in readiness to receive his spirit as an angry mob began to pummel his body with stones. It occurs to me that Stephen just might have been the first recipient of a standing ovation!

## Nobility without Purity

The United States of America is still mired in the business of nation building. We do, however, have a decent track record in this area. After World War II, we rebuilt Japan and Germany. We're now in the process of doing the same for Iraq. The jury is out regarding Afghanistan. Nation building is an arduous and often frustrating task. If you doubt the veracity of that statement, ask Nehemiah!

Ezra and Nehemiah were men of God whose responsibility it was to oversee the rebuilding of a nation that was destroyed by the Babylonians seventy years earlier. Ezra was adept with the scriptures, and gave himself to the spiritual education of God's people. Nehemiah was a God-gifted administrator who was committed to rebuilding Jerusalem's infrastructure for the glory of God. They worked in tandem to accomplish those goals.

One of the key objectives in nation building is to discover and develop a core of national leaders. As one reads through the chronicles of Nehemiah, it is readily apparent that his greatest challenge (or obstacle) consisted of those whom he referred to as "nobles." That word is found nine times in the book of Nehemiah (KJV), and is translated from two different Hebrew words.

The Hebrew word **chowz**, which signifies that which is white or pure (from the cleansing or glowing power of fire), is used seven times (2:16; 4:14, 19; 5:7; 6:17; 7:5; 13:17). It derives from charar, which means to glow, melt or burn, and is used figuratively to describe that which shows or incites passion. Nehemiah used this word to distinguish these men by societal rank, but more than mere rank is in view. National leaders—the nobility in the best sense of that word—are expected to exhibit a passion for God, personal purity in their leadership roles, and, by example, incite the same aspirations in those they lead!

The second Hebrew word used by Nehemiah to describe the national leadership is **addiyr**, meaning wide or large. In the figurative sense, it means powerful. It derives from adar, which means to expand. It refers to those who have risen to positions of power by expanding themselves personally and influentially. Nehemiah uses this word on two occasions (3:5; 10:29). He is not referring to two different kinds of leaders, but rather to the same leaders from two different perspectives. The ideal leader is one whose passion for God and personal purity is the foundation of his power and influence in society. I believe we are safe in assuming that Nehemiah expected nothing less from the nobles in Israel who had returned from Babylonian captivity. But for Nehemiah the nation builder, there was a disconnect between the expectation and the experience.

When the time finally came for Nehemiah to share with the people what God had put in his heart to do for the city of Jerusalem, he assured them that the hand of God was upon him, and proclaimed: "Come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach." They responded: "Let us rise up and build" (2:17-18). But "their nobles put not their necks to the work of their Lord" (3:5). The problem with these men is still with us today—position without passion!

Nehemiah included the nobles in subsequent admonitions, encouraging them to put fear aside and fight for their brethren...because God himself was fighting for them (4:14, 19-20). But the nobles, rather than fighting for their fellow countrymen, were exacting usury (excessive taxes) for personal gain and inducing much discouragement. Nehemiah set a great assembly against them, rebuked them publicly, and convinced them to restore that which had been confiscated by abuse of power. The nobles agreed (no doubt reluctantly) to provide the citizenry with a tax refund as well as tax relief going forward (5:7-13). Now that's my kind of government...and I suspect yours as well. The current administration in Washington is reenacting the abuses of these derelict nobles. It is clearly the most abusive in my lifetime. And you can bet they have designs on a lot more than your taxable income!

Now that the nobles were no longer able to profit from their confiscatory tax policy, they pioneered business initiatives (creating a virtual farmers' market) that were conducted on the Sabbath day within the city gates. Once again Nehemiah was embroiled in contention with these men over their sacrilegious behavior and total disregard for things sacred. It obviously slipped their minds, but their profane business practices threatened to bring more wrath upon Israel (13:17-18). Alas this problem persists to the present day—position without purity!

All of us long for nobles within our national leadership who will bring godly passions and personal purity to the positions they hold. God knows America could use a little nation building of its own in this area...and only he knows if that day will ever come. But nobles are needed in two additional areas of our culture that are every bit as critical as our national leadership! Those two areas are our homes and our churches! If these two institutions are found wanting in terms of godly passion and personal purity, especially among those of us who name the name of Christ, do we have any basis to expect more from our elected leaders?

## Under-Promising, Over-Delivering

My work experience in the corporate world over the last twenty-five years has taught me a number of important lessons. One of the most valuable with respect to dealing with customers-clients for the delivery of goods-services is the art of setting a reasonable and agreed-upon expectation and then exceeding that expectation. This time-tested principle is known as "Under-Promise, Over-Deliver."

Are you seasoned enough to remember your parents pulling the family car into the neighborhood gas station to fill up the tank? Yes, I am referring to the days of "Full Service" before "Self Service" ever entered the mind of a proprietor. No one had to exit the car...except for a restroom visit. The smiling attendant would rush out and ask, "What'll it be?" Upon hearing the words "Fill 'er up!" he would engage the pump, check tire pressures and fluid levels, and wash the windshield...all while the pump was running.

Now, those days are long gone, but the principle remains. The best way to secure repeat business (and thereby grow a business) is to exceed the expectations of your customer on a regular basis. Individuals and businesses that employ this proven success formula will always have an edge over those who take the customer for granted.

First question: Since scripture represents the Lord God as One Who both Promises and Delivers, to what extent does the "Under-Promise, Over-Deliver" formula apply to Kingdom business? Some form of the word "promise" is used over 100 times in reference to God setting an expectation for his people. Derivatives of the word "deliver" are used even more often to describe our Lord making good on his promises.

Next question: Is God in the business of Under-Promising? Hardly! According to Peter, God's promises to his people are "exceeding great and precious" (2 Peter 1:4). Is it possible for the human mind to get a grip on the magnitude of any promise that transcends greatness? Phraseology of this sort precludes Under-Promising as a descriptive option. And we dare not think of this as Over-Promising, for that would imply God might at some point set an expectation that was beyond his ability to meet...much less exceed! What God is in the process of doing when he issues promises and sets expectations for those who trust him is simply beyond the ability of the English language.

The word "precious" (Gk. **timios**) signifies that which is honorable and esteemed due to its great value or price. It is no accident that Peter used the same root to refer to the *precious* quality of the Chief Corner Stone of the Kingdom, the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:7). Thus we see the inextricable and incontrovertible link between the precious Person of Christ and the promises that are an extension of it. The only way to diminish a promise is to limit the capacity of the One who gave it. Enough said!

Peter further explains to us that these exceedingly great and precious promises, having been embraced by the believer as a means of escape from corruptive lust, are now the building blocks upon which we partake of the divine nature. The measure by which we internalize God's promises is the same measure by which God is able to internalize himself in us! Show me a man or woman that radiates the Lord Jesus in character,

countenance and conduct, and I'll show you one who is daily ingesting the truth of God as his or her essential spiritual food!

Question three: Is God in the business of Over-Delivering? Absolutely! Paul affirmed to the Ephesians that God was able to do *exceeding abundantly above* all that they were able *to ask or think* (Ephesians 3:20). Last time I checked, that was the very definition and essence of Over-Delivering! Again, the apostle encouraged us with these words: "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9). It sure sounds to me like Over-Delivery by our Lord will be the inevitable outcome of our sojourn to the Promised Land where we shall see him face-to-face!

Practical question: When was the last time that you and I as believers, in agreement with our gifts and calling, actually over-delivered to those we serve? Preacher, when did you last deliver fresh expository insights in Holy Ghost power that provided spiritual grist for God's people? For those who minister, teach, exhort, give, rule and show mercy, when was the last time the exercise of your spiritual gift(s) took you into uncharted waters?

In stark contrast to the entrepreneur who under-promises and over-delivers, and the God whose exceeding great and precious promises are exceeded only by his ability to over-deliver on them, is Satan. A thoughtful reflection upon Genesis 3 shows us that Satan, in speaking with Eve, over-promised and under-delivered! The promise of a god-like existence resulted in spiritual death and slavery to sin! And so it has been for the last six-thousand or so years. The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life will always promise more than they can deliver, and then deliver that which is an affront to God and ruinous to the soul!

## Leanness of Soul

Historians who chronicle twenty-first century America will no doubt call attention to its great technological advances. At the forefront is medical science, which appears to be on the cusp of epic cures for a wide range of illnesses, such as cancer, diabetes, heart disease and others. Moreover, our generation appears to be terminally obsessed with the physical and cosmetic aspects of life: Botox, weight-loss, whiter teeth, radiant hair, PX90 "Beach Body" workouts, and body-contouring undergarments that make one look better without being better.

Now, there is no problem with attention to the physical. The apostle Paul taught us the importance of what we do with our bodies by declaring them to be (1) the "the temple of the Holy Ghost", and (2) an integral part of what God purchased when he redeemed us (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). One of the great challenges of discipleship is striking a proper balance between body and soul...neglecting neither to satisfy the needs of the other.

The Pharisees—alleged spiritual leaders of Israel in their day—were guilty of cultivating and perpetuating an obsession with the external aspects of law and life. The misguided zeal of these men led them to tithe the mint leaves and herbs from their gardens while passing over judgment and the love of God (Luke 11:42). Our Lord had this to say about the imbalance: "These ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone!" The sin of leaving undone those functions that promote soul vitality is a Pharisaical legacy that remains to this day!

A few thousand years before the Pharisees institutionalized neglect of soul, the wandering Israelites, as their spiritual predecessors, had nationalized it. The Psalmist, as part of a high-level historical summary, wrote the following words describing God's response to a people obsessed with the physical: "And he gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul" (Psalm 106:15). What God *gave* them with reference to the body is set in contrast to what he *sent* them with reference to the soul. At first blush we observe that the granting of requests by God is not surefire evidence of spiritual health.

The word "leanness" (Heb. '**rasown**') signifies that something is less than it ought to be (i.e., lacking flesh or fat; lacking richness, sufficiency or productiveness; deficient in an essential or important quality or ingredient). In other words, the soul suffering from leanness is missing something that it ought to have. An engine mechanic knows full well what happens to an automobile whose fuel mixture is too lean—sufficient compression but no combustion! A lean fuel mixture can render a muscle car powerless! So it is with the child of God whose focus is external (physical) to the neglect of the internal (spiritual). And so it was with Israel in the wilderness. It is quite clear they were desirous of everything but the one thing they really needed: the Lord God himself!

A second observation is the mention of their "soul" in singular form. The primary emphasis of the context is thus national, not individual. We know of a certainty that there were at least two spiritual stalwarts, men of faith, in the congregation: Joshua and Caleb. But these two giants (and no doubt a number of others with kindred souls) were required to put their dreams on hold for forty years while God dealt collectively with an elect

people who were mired in carnality and soul deficiency. It is clear that our beloved America is experiencing at this hour that same leanness of soul. In my humble opinion, our leanness is attributable in large measure to pervasive lostness among our citizenry and lukewarmness within our churches.

There is only one thing more lamentable than a lean soul...and that is a lost soul! Jesus taught that one who was able to attach personal property rights to the entire world would be essentially bankrupt without soul salvation (Mark 8:36). For those who exhibit abnormal obsession with physical preservation, Jesus offered this pungent dose of reality: "And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28).

Consider with me for a moment a few of the things that God has sent during the course of history. He sent Lot out of Sodom as a life-preserving measure (Genesis 19:29). He sent Moses back to Egypt to deliver His people from bondage (Exodus 3:12-15). He sent Paul to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1:17). He sent forth His Son in the fullness of time to provide redemption for sinners, and the Spirit of his Son into the hearts of believers so they could interact as sons with their Father (Galatians 4:4-5). I am absolutely convinced that leanness of soul is the last thing—the VERY LAST thing—that God ever wants to send to his people!

I love Snickers bars! I remember buying bags of Snickers miniatures for trick-or-treaters with the hope that we would have sufficient leftovers for personal consumption. Perhaps you've seen the Snickers TV ad that touts the candy bar's ability to squelch those untimely stomach growls, and ends with this prohibition: "Don't let hunger happen to you!" In like manner, based on what we know about the value of our souls and the willingness of the God of grace to fill them with Himself, it is entirely proper to assert: "Don't let leanness of soul happen to you!"

## Fumble by the Father of Faith

Abraham was the first patriarch of Israel and the spiritual progenitor of all who have been justified by faith. He is often referred to as the Father of Faith. But the scriptures reveal that Abraham was as vulnerable to fleshly devices as any other man. In Genesis 20:1-18, we find him engaged in a real life situation involving genuine passions.

Abraham had journeyed toward the south country, and came to Gerar (20:1). He lied to Abimelech regarding his wife Sarah. She was his wife and half-sister, but was represented as a full sister in order to avoid being slain by the king for his wife (20:11). Upon hearing that Sarah's relationship with Abraham was strictly biological and not marital, Abimelech took Sarah, placing himself and his household in serious jeopardy before God (20:2-3).

God intervened in a dream, and set Abimelech on a course of action to resolve the issue (20:3-7). Abraham was forced to confess his faithless subterfuge in what surely must have been an embarrassing situation (20:11-13). Afterward he functioned as a true prophet in praying for Abimelech and his household (20:17-18). The result was a blessing for the house of Abimelech (20:18), and a promised conception for Sarah (21:2).

This episode in the life of Abraham has at least three key spiritual lessons for us. The first is the danger of false assumptions. He had wrongly assumed: "the fear of God is not in this place" (20:11). His assumption bordered on arrogance. It was an insult to Abimelech and an affront to God. The fact that God had placed a special call upon Abraham did not preclude Him from revealing Himself to others and establishing relationships with them. Abraham was a little obtuse to this truth. His false assumption led him into deception. King Abimelech was a man who feared God, and it is clear from the context that this was not the first time God and Abimelech had exchanged dialogue. We must keep in mind that God is free to work where He wills, and is under no obligation to make all of His ways known to us!

The second is the value of integrity. Integrity of heart is a deep-seated determination to do that which is right! Integrity enables one to behave with his or her passions under control. Abimelech was smitten with the beauty of Sarah. Based on the information given to him, he took a course of action that was honorable and acceptable. When confronted by God, he argued: "In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands have I done this" (20:5). God responded by validating his claim to integrity, and affirming "I also withheld thee from sinning against me" because his integrity was intact (20:6).

We learn from Abimelech that having integrity in the time of decision is more vital than mere information. God can work with the integrity of our hearts to protect us from bad information. But no amount of good information can protect us from a devious heart that lacks integrity!

The third is the method of God in reproofing His own. In the Biblical record, Abimelech was the only individual to whom God spoke. Moreover, he is the only one who spoke directly to God. He was also God's vehicle for reproofing both Abraham and Sarah. Here

is God's reproof of Abraham's from the lips of Abimelech: "What has thou done unto us? and what have I offended thee, that thou hast brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? thou hast done deeds unto me that ought not to be done?" (20:9). The severity of this rebuke is self-explanatory! He is guilty as charged! Now here is Sarah's reproof: "Behold, I have given thy brother a thousand pieces of silver: behold, he is to thee a covering of the eyes, unto all that are with thee, and with all other" (20:16).

The phrase *thy brother* is a subtle reminder of her complicity in the deception (20:5). In referring to Abraham as a covering of the eyes, Abimelech reproves her for blind and reckless loyalty to her husband. In other words, no amount of loyalty to a mate can excuse deception. Because Abimelech had kept his own integrity intact, he was in a position to reprove a wife who had compromised hers. We learn from Sarah that integrity should always trump loyalty in any situation where there is a potential conflict between the two!

It is clear that Abraham, the Father of Faith, fumbled the ball in his initial dealings with Abimelech. May the Lord enable us to benefit from his experience in matters pertaining to our assumptions and the integrity of our hearts. Moreover, we must understand that a reproof delivered by a brother or sister in Christ might well be a rebuke delivered in God's stead.

## Footprints

In 1998, while working for an AT&T subsidiary, I took a temporary gig as an Inbound Customer Service Rep for the wireless business unit. Some calls were made by folks who had just acquired a cell phone, and needed setup assistance. Others had a lost-stolen phone and requested account deactivation to avoid bogus charges. The majority of calls involved a billing issue, many of which had to do with “roaming” charges.

A roaming charge was incurred any time the user went outside of our wireless footprint—the effective coverage area based on cell tower configuration—with the result that a collaborating provider’s footprint picked up the call to avoid interruption. If no other footprint was available, the user experienced a “dropped” call. Competitors charged us for that backup service in the form of a roaming fee. Now, these service transfers were seamless for the user in real time, but came to light—oftentimes alarmingly so—upon examination of the monthly bill. I learned first-hand how irate customers can become when you mess with their money!

Technological advances in wireless communications have virtually eliminated the roaming charge. The AT&T that once infuriated customers with roaming fees now boasts a wireless footprint that covers 97% of the nation. The latest footprint to stir controversy is the Carbon footprint—the machination of a socialist network hell-bent on establishing a New World Order and regulating every carbon-emitting entity on the planet...including you and me!

The student of scripture can readily discern the concept of a spiritual footprint. As a wireless footprint reflects its effective coverage area, so also does a spiritual footprint reflect the extent or measure of godly influence exerted by both individual believers and the local churches of which they consist. A few illustrations are in order.

Lot is an example of a righteous man with an ineffectual footprint. Over the course of time, Lot migrated toward Sodom, ultimately resided in the city and took his place within its leadership (Genesis 19:1). We know that Lot had at least four daughters—two of which were unmarried virgins (19:8) and at least two that married men of Sodom, who thus became his sons-in-law (19:14). When informed of Sodom’s impending doom because of its iniquity, Lot beat feet to his sons-in-law, and urged them to evacuate. But he was not taken seriously. It’s evident that his married daughters likewise dismissed his impassioned plea. Few things weigh more heavily on the heart of a Father than an awareness that his spiritual footprint has failed to impact his own children in matters pertaining to righteousness.

The church at Corinth is a case study in the undersized spiritual footprint. This body of believers, notwithstanding the plethora of spiritual gifts with which God had graced them (1 Corinthians 1:5-7), had a spiritual footprint that was wanting. Paul’s rebuke: “Awake to righteousness, and sin not; for some have not the knowledge of God: I speak this to your shame (15:34). Failure to propagate the gospel in the city and to the surrounding areas was a stinging indictment! How would you rate the evangelism-missions footprint of your church?

The first Corinthian epistle could also serve as a “how to” guide to footprint atrophy. In order to achieve a similar outcome, a modern-day church need only engage itself in one or more of the following: personnel politics (1:12-13), toleration of sexual perversion (5:1-2), litigation against fellow believers (6:1-8), indifference to the public sins of its membership (6:9-11), disregard for the sanctity of marriage (7:1-40), and doctrinal corruption (15:1-28).

The church at Thessalonica, in contrast, is a prime example of a robust spiritual footprint (1 Thessalonians 1:5-8). Its mentors—Spirit-filled gospel preachers with solid assurance and godly lives—produced a congregation of *followers*, who became *examples* to the entire Macedonian region. It's the classic NT model for footprint expansion in the context of discipleship! The formula for a thriving spiritual footprint can be summed up in four words: The Mentored become Mentors!

The verb “sounded out” (Gk. **execheo**, “to sound forth, emit sound, resound”) in reference to the Word is perfect tense, passive voice. It portrays the Thessalonian believers as wielding the Word with permanent impact, so that it literally resonated throughout the region. The verb “spread abroad” (Gk. **exerchomai**, “to go out, come forth”) in reference to their God-ward faith is also perfect tense, indicating that their testimony enjoyed the same kind of staying power. A church is in the “sweet spot” in terms of its spiritual footprint when the population to which it ministers affirms that the lives of its members are in sync with the body of truth it proclaims!

Every church and child of God has a spiritual footprint with a corresponding degree of influence or impact. How many times over the years have lost men and women searching for truth traversed our spiritual footprint (individually or collectively) only to be “dropped” because our footprint did not extend as far as their need? That, my friend, is a roaming charge that no sinner for whom Christ died should have to incur!

## A Study in Delusion (Part 1)

A delusion is a persistent false belief regarding oneself (or other persons-objects) that is maintained in spite of indisputable evidence to the contrary. The victims of delusion consistently embrace the false as true. In short, they believe a lie. None of us like to think of ourselves as susceptible to delusion. But the scriptures reveal that all of us, with the proper preconditioning, can be snookered.

The KJV makes two references to delusion. The first is found in Isaiah 66:4 ("delusions"). The second is found in 2 Thessalonians 2:11 ("delusion"). An analysis of each text will demonstrate that delusion exists in epidemic proportions within the America culture. In this *Pen*, we will examine its first usage: Isaiah 66:4.

In Isaiah 66:1-4, the Lord was looking for individuals who (1) were aware of their spiritual need, (2) possessed a spirit that was contrite (broken) over personal sin, and (3) trembled at his word (66:2). God issued a clarion call, but the nation did not hear, and none answered (66:4). Israel chose their own ways instead, and found delightful a myriad of abominations in which their God had no delight (66:3-4).

A reading of 66:3 reveals that God's major bone of contention with Israel was the turning of a sanctified religion into sacrilege. First in the list of indictments was killing an ox as if slaying a man. Why does a man kill another man? He's revengeful, full of anger! In every ox sacrificed was contempt for the God who mandated it! Second was failure to grasp the significance of the lamb as prefiguring Messiah. As far as they were concerned, it might as well have been a dog. Third was the equating of oblations to swine's blood. Can you imagine what an affront the second and third indictments were to the God of redemption? Fourth was the burning of incense in a manner that was worship-free. They might as well have burned it to an idol. Serious indictments indeed!

The Lord responded to their choices as follows: "I also will chose their delusions, and will bring their fears upon them" (66:4). The word "delusions" is instructive. It's the Hebrew word **ta'aluwl** ("wantonness vexation, petulance, childishness"). In its only other biblical usage, it is translated "babes" (3:4). Now, a petulant man is insolent or rude in speech or behavior as one would expect from a child who has a problem with authority. Comparing scripture with scripture leads me to conclude that the "delusions" of 66:4 are a second reference to the "babes" of 3:4. Both lie within similar judgment contexts. A feature of that judgment is God giving them children for their princes and "babes" to rule over them. Do not confuse the "babes" God gives in judgment with those out of whose mouths God has *ordained strength* (Psalm 8:2, which Jesus cited with rejoicing in Luke 10:21).

The petulant babes of Isaiah 3:1-8, who would one day occupy Israel's leadership, lacked the gravitas to provide spiritual, moral and military strength for the nation. Contrariwise, they would oppress the nation and oversee its ruination. The agenda of these "babes" is thus described: dismantling the military (3:2), corrupting the judiciary (3:2), attacking the prophets (3:2), dismissing the wisdom of sages (3:2), inhibiting the free enterprise of skilled artisans (3:3), and censoring eloquent orators (3:3). These, my

friend, are a few of the realities in play when God in judgment turns a nation over to its delusions and fears by putting "babes" in charge.

The history of Israel with its track record of petulant leadership is being repeated in America! The current White House administration is essentially a cadre of "babes" actively pursuing an Isaiah 3 agenda. At some point they will arrive at replication unless deterred. If you and I were not aware of the Isaiah source for the aforementioned realities, we might have easily mistaken them for a compilation of 2010 headlines from any number of Christian and or conservative news outlets.

As a theological-political conservative and registered Independent, I perceive widespread corruption and cowardice in both major parties. At the end of the day, God Almighty will hold every nation accountable for the manner in which it responded to his truth. God has given America much, and therefore much is required. He is no respecter of persons or nations.

America appears to be in the midst of divine judgment with "babes" at the helm. They are trampling our Constitution, stacking the Supreme Court with activists, erasing our liberties on a daily basis, destroying the private-sector economy (the domain of skilled artisans), accusing our prophets of hate speech, and consistently giving deference to demonic Islam at the expense of Israel and the Christian faith. There are those who firmly believe that our leaders are simply trying to dig their way out of an inherited mess. But evidence to the contrary is indisputable! They *are* the mess!

Without a spiritual awakening that restores the God of the Bible to his proper place in our national dialogue, the America we have known and loved will cease to exist! Ronald Reagan said it best: "If we ever forget that we're one nation under GOD, then we will be a nation gone under." In the next *Pen*, we'll look at the second reference to delusion: 2 Thessalonians 2:11.

## A Study in Delusion (Part 2)

In our previous Pen, we discussed the delusions God had chosen for Israel as an expression of his judgment for their wicked choices, delighting themselves in things for which God had no delight. We sought to make the case that these “delusions” (66:4) were a second reference to the “babes” Isaiah had earlier predicted (3:4). We also observed that the societal wreckage they imposed on Israel is in the process of replication in America.

The process of deterioration was set in motion decades ago. But the pedal-to-the-metal acceleration of wreckage under the current leadership tells me that God is just about fed up with America murdering its unborn, granting “marriage” status to homosexual perverts, evicting the Godhead from the public domain, painting targets on his prophets, and stabbing Israel—the apple of his eye—in the back. The fiscal dereliction of the last two occupants of the White House has taken our nation to the brink of bankruptcy! Our delusions are real indeed!

The second mention of “delusion” is found in 2 Thessalonians 2:11. In the context, Paul is dealing with a false teaching about the coming of Christ, which had troubled the brethren. The error that had infiltrated the church was an allegation by some that the day of Christ was at hand (2:2). It contradicted what Paul taught them in his first epistle about being “caught up” to meet the Lord in the air...an event that would transpire before the onset of the Day of the Lord. In pre-Trib lingo, they thought they had missed the Rapture.

In order to quell this error, Paul provided additional prophetic detail regarding the events-activities that would characterize the Day of Christ...a time of global turmoil the Church will miss as part of the salvation package its members received upon belief of the truth (2:13). When he wrote his second epistle, none of the events he went on to describe had taken place...evidence that the Day of the Lord was not yet underway!

Paul wanted them to know that *the mystery of iniquity* (Gk. **anomias**, “lawlessness”) was already operating, but had not yet attained full-blown proportions (2:7). The One who was hindering the full expression of lawlessness would at some point be taken out of the way, making way for the revelation of the Wicked one (the man of sin, the son of perdition). The One who is currently exerting his restraining influence is the Holy Spirit. The body of Christ, the habitation of God through the Spirit, now serves as a salt-and-light retardant. When the Spirit is taken out, the Church will be caught up. The removal of salt-light will open the floodgates of lawlessness!

The one referred to as “The Wicked” is the Antichrist. He will be empowered by Satan and possess the ability to facilitate signs and lying wonders in an attempt to mimic Christ and authenticate himself as God in the flesh and more (2:4). Jesus performed signs and wonders anchored in truth. Those done by antichrist will lend credence to the BIG LIE—that he is the one for whom the world has been waiting. Many of you may recall hearing that very claim come from the lips of a 2008 presidential candidate.

The BIG LIE victims are identified as “them that perish” (2:10). The verb perish (Gk. **apollumi**, “to destroy”) is a present passive participle preceded by the definite article. Literal translation: “the ones who are in the process of being destroyed.” The reason they continue to perish and buy into the BIG LIE is rooted in a rejection of the gospel when the Spirit of God sought to apply it to their hearts. When a sinner hears the gospel of God’s love as demonstrated in the vicarious death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus on his or her behalf, and rejects the truth, that individual (after Spirit-Church removal) is locked into eternal damnation (2:12).

The scripture thus affirms: “And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie” (2:11). The word *delusion* is the Gk. **plane** (“a wandering, a straying about”) from which our English word “planet” is derived. Astronomers discover planets by taking a series of photos of the same portion of night sky and identifying “wandering” objects in relation to “fixed” objects. Metaphorically, the word can refer to mental error based on a faulty opinion, resulting in spiritual-moral error permeating the entire life. And so it shall be for those who reject the gospel in this age. With no post-Rapture Spirit presence to help them “fixate” their souls on the Lord Jesus Christ, they will wander in the mire of strong delusion and embrace the BIG LIE.

If you doubt the possibility of such pervasive deception, consider the growth of Islam. The Pew Forum estimates there are 1.57 billion practicing Muslims world-wide (22% of the world's population) with an annual growth rate of 2.9% (world = 2.3%). If Satan can convince nearly one-fourth of earth’s inhabitants to worship a non-existent Allah, what do you suppose he can accomplish with the signs-wonders ministry of Antichrist? I believe he will allege Yahweh and Allah to be one and the same, and himself the embodiment of both. What better way to unite the descendants of Ishmael and Isaac behind one world leader? Moreover, he will be able to claim credit for the Rapture as a punitive measure against Christians inasmuch as they constituted the last impediment to real peace. Those once fearful they were “Left Behind” will now rejoice that they are “Still Around” for the BIG SHOW!

Question: How does God send strong delusion? The same way he sent leanness into the souls of his people in the wilderness (Psalm 106:15). He simply removes his gracious influence, and abandons the rebellious to their selfish desires. The delusion will derive its strength from the God-vacuum created in the Rapture’s wake!

The one thing that is worse than leanness of soul is its delusion. For the sinner who persists in unbelief until the Spirit of God is removed and the Antichrist is revealed, the strong delusion that inevitably follows will lead to his or her damnation! Today, dear friend, if you hear his voice, harden not your heart!

## Evangelistic Power

Prior to his ascension back to the right hand of the Father, our Lord issued a command for his followers to “go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). In conjunction with this timeless mandate, he promised a reception of Holy Ghost power for command execution unto the uttermost part of the earth (Acts 1:8). Thus the subsequent expansion of the church of the living God, against which the gates of hell would fail to prevail, was to be fueled by evangelistic power!

The NT book of Acts provides for the believer an historical record of that power as it emanated from Jerusalem to Rome and beyond. We find evangelistic power in operation on a grand scale where thousands at a time found salvation in the Lord Jesus. In addition, the inspired narrative records a number of one-on-one encounters with the same evangelistic power in operation. The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is both universal and personal!

Acts 16 is dedicated to the portrayal of events leading up to and including a night spent in the Philippian prison. It teaches us three vital truths regarding kingdom endeavor as it pertains to evangelistic power. (1) Obedience to a revealed truth can result in trouble. (2) Visions carried out to victory may come at significant cost. (3) All of us as believers are expendable in the divine mission of winning the lost and discipling the saved. Just ask Paul and Silas (Acts 16:25-34). In that text—one that portrays a most unique demonstration of evangelistic power—we find three of its fundamental ingredients.

First is the intervention of God. It is a given that nothing of real kingdom value ever gets done apart from God being present on the scene. We're speaking of a presence that is both meaningful and manifested. Our evidence of such a presence is the “great earthquake” (16:26). Hear the Psalmist: “Tremble, thou earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob” (114:7). And tremble it did! Paul and company got caught up in praise, and the Lord showed up in power! Psalm 16:11 affirms the union of God's presence and fullness of joy!

It is worth noting that Luke's narrative provides a set of before and after photos. Before the intervention, we see the evangelists bound and the sinner sleeping. After God intervenes, the evangelists are loosed and the sinner is wide awake. The jailor was dead in sins when the sun went down, but alive in Christ by dawn! Which of the two pictures would you say best represents your church and the sinners that surround it? We hear a lot these days about family members-friends conducting interventions for someone who suffers from a destructive habit, such as drug-alcohol abuse, in an effort to turn the debilitating tide. The modern-day church, bound by its apathy and superficiality, is likewise in desperate need of an intervention that only her God can perform!

Second is the inquiry of the jailor. The intervention awoke him to a life-and-death situation. Supposing that the prisoners had fled through open prison doors, he drew his sword to commit suicide (16:27). We have no way of knowing exactly what he was thinking, but two possibilities come to mind. (1) I am not going to suffer a public humiliation for losing the prisoners, or (2) Those who find my body will conclude I was

overcome and killed by the prisoners in the line of duty. In either case, it's clear that the action he contemplated was driven by a need to protect his ego-reputation. Self always dies hard...especially in a Roman soldier with big-time credentials.

Paul cried out with a loud voice: "Do thyself no harm: for we are all here" (16:28). The jailor was immediately set free to consider a far more weighty issue. This military veteran, who just a few moments earlier was deathly afraid of being on the wrong side of Rome, is now obsessed with being on the right side of God!

Jesus taught the Jews that seeking honor from men rather than that which comes from God only was an obstacle to the exercise of saving faith (John 5:44). For the jailor, that obstacle was removed as evidenced in the inquiry: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (16:30). In other words: "I need what you guys have! How do I get it?" When sinners find themselves asking this of saints, you know that God is on the scene, and evangelistic power is in full operation! As far as the jailor picking up on the concept of salvation, it is likely that Paul and Silas were singing the Psalms, which contain at least 110 references to God saving the believer and or providing salvation.

Third is the instruction of the apostle. It was succinct yet complete: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house" (16:31). No dissertation, no intellectual-theological complexity. They instructed him to look outside of himself to the One who alone could save from sin. What was good for him was applicable to his house. It is an empirical truth that the best way to win an entire family to Jesus is to win the man first!

The jailor embraced the truth as he "rejoiced, believing in God with all his house" (16:34). The verb "rejoiced" is a simple aorist, and includes the idea of leaping. "Believing" is perfect tense. Expanded translation: "Having believed on Jesus with fixed resolve, he leaped for joy." Such is the effect of saving faith in those who set their affection upon and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Faith is indeed the victory that overcomes the world!

In summary, the sixteenth chapter of Acts records the salvation of three very different sinners. We find Lydia, a devout business woman, whose heart the Lord opened; the demon-possessed damsel who was delivered from the clutches of Satan; and a military veteran who came to esteem a relationship with God as more valuable than his standing with Rome! Such is the nature of evangelistic power. It affirms that no sinner, without regard for his or her level of sophistication, sinfulness or stature, is beyond the transforming grace of the Lord Jesus!