

TOWARD AN EFFECTIVE MINISTRY

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THE LAMB
WHO WAS SLAIN
HAS BEGUN
HIS REIGN



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HEARING THE CALL

And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. Mark 1:16-18

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, lord; you know that I love you." He said to him "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you off where you do not wish to go." (This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God.) And after this he said to him, "Follow me." John 21:15-20

If we were asked to compare the function of a Christian congregation to its counterpart in the auto industry, we might think of a factory where new cars are produced, or perhaps a bump shop where they are repaired. But hardly a junk yard.

Suppose that one day you're making the rounds of the junk yards in search of a transmission for your car. In one of them an astonishing thing happens. A man comes into the yard who needs only to touch the remains of a wreck and it becomes a brand new car again. He touches a 1994 Chevy. Instantly it's new. He brushes against a 1988 Ford. Suddenly it looks as it did when it left the factory. He leaves, and all the people in the junk yard are scratching their heads. Did that really happen? Was there such a person? He's gone, but there's a new cara brand new car!

The church of Jesus Christ is not a factory where new souls are produced from scratch ... nor is it a bump shop, (although very often it is thought to be one; a place where spiritual fenders are straightened). No... the church of Jesus Christ is a junk yard. We are an assembly of human wrecks who have been, or are being, brought back from the dead. With some of us it's a slow painful process ... with others it seems to happen more rapidly. But it is happening. And even if you can't see the One

who's performing it, you're seeing the results ... look around you. If you walk up to one of these revived souls and ask him or her what happened, every single one will give you the same answer: "A man came to me and called me by name. And when I turned around and answered his call this happened." We may not fully understand who this man is. We cannot see him with our eyes, or touch him with our hands, or hear him with these ears ... yet we know the call of his voice in the center of our hearts. We know that he has a claim on us. We know in our bones that we were born to hear that call and that our whole life up to this moment was spent waiting for it to come. We may not yet understand the ins and outs of his death and resurrection, yet we somehow begin now to understand that it is the power of that death and the power of that resurrection which comes to us in that call and draws us by that call into the very heart of God.

And this miracle goes all the way back twenty centuries, to the beginning. If you talk to Peter and you ask him what caused the change in his life he would say, "I was fishing one day and this man came along and said, 'Follow me'....and I knew I had to go."

"Matthew, how did it happen to you?"

"I was in my tax office counting my money ... here comes this man who says, 'Follow me.' I had no choice but to get up and go."

"Mary Magdalene, what ever happened to you ... I never saw you like this before."

"I was living in a mental hell. Suddenly my mind cleared and standing before me was this man who told me that my sins were forgiven."

"Oh, you mean the call comes to some but misses others?"

No, sooner or later the call of that man comes to every single soul that has ever or will ever be born. For he says himself,

"And I when I am lifted up from the earth, (on the cross), will draw all men, (women), unto myself." John 12:32

He will fulfill those words. But many hear the call and know they're hearing it, and understand what it means, and go on their way.

"I married a wife and I cannot come ... I got some land and I have to look at it ... Let me first go and bury my father."

But for those who answer the call, the miracle happens in every life without exception.

Now the call that comes to us has two aspects. First, there is the initial hearing. It's like being in a deep sleep and your wife or your husband is trying to wake you up. Your name is called ten times and you don't seem to hear it. You grunt and roll over and continue sleeping. Then suddenly you hear it. You shake yourself and jump out of bed. And so it may be with some who are reading these words. A voice has been calling you by name. Then the moment comes when you hear it. If you respond to that call, you begin to experience the mercy of God and you begin to change.

The second aspect of this call is the daily hearing of it. There are those who have the idea that you just have to hear it once and you're all set. If you think that because you came down to the altar once-upon-a-time and asked Jesus into your life, confessed your sin, and shed some tears, that that blazing and wonderful experience is going to hold you all the way through, you are in for a surprise. Glorious as it is, that experience by itself will no more keep you through your life than a marvelous wedding ceremony will keep a man and woman married for fifty years ... you've got to hear that call every day.

If any one would come after me let him deny himself (herself), take up his cross daily and follow me. Mark 8:43b

If I don't have enough sense every day to put other things aside and be still and listen once again, I will soon drift beyond hearing range. But if I make the time and settle down in my heart and listen, I will again hear the voice of the Shepherd and I will be renewed.

My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me, and I give them eternal life. John 10:27

It doesn't matter whether you heard the call fifteen years ago or if you hear it for the first time today, the call of the Lord upon our lives is,

first of all, a call to the unworthy. He doesn't call you because you've got something to offer. ("Wouldn't it be wonderful if so-and-so became a Christian. Think of all the people who would come into the kingdom because he's such a wonderful ball player ... because she's so pretty ... because he's a brain.")

It comes for the very opposite reason. God allows us to get to the junk yard stage in our lives so that when we come to life it's clear that we didn't do it he did it!

As Jesus passed on from there he saw a man called Matthew sitting in his tax office. And he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.

And as he sat at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."

"Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Matthew 9:9-13

There are many who have the idea that they will not hear the call of Jesus until they get their lives together... it's the other way around. You will never get your life together until you first hear and respond to the call of the Lord which comes to you as an act of sheer mercy. If you will be still inside your heart, Friend, you will hear him calling you today ... and as you respond all things become new. He didn't come to call the righteous, he came to call sinners. This is not a Cadillac assembly plant, this is a junkyard. And if you're not willing to be included in the junk yard you won't be able to hear that call. The fact that we're a piece of junk is no problem to the Lord at all. It is his joy to take that piece of junk which is our life and raise it up into something that is pleasing to God and a blessing to man.

The second thing about this call is that it comes to those whose hearts are tender.

Today when you hear his voice do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion Hebrews 3:7,8

And the reason why the call of the Lord which has been extended to many of us for years didn't get through was because we were anything but tender... because our hearts were critical, hard, self-righteous, full of judgment. We saw all the other hypocrites, and never imagined what hypocrites we were. For this reason, God, in his mercy, has taken many of us down a path of circumstances that has had the effect of softening our hearts, so that when we come out through the other end of our Valley of Trial, we are no longer so sure we have all the answers. We are no longer so quick to judge other people. We are now more broken and more tender and more merciful in our attitudes toward those around us.

So that now when Jesus comes, we begin to understand what he says to us. As long as I'm sitting on the top of the world, the money's rolling in, everybody's my friend, success is my constant companion, I don't have any interest in this strange man from Galilee who calls me to follow him. But after tragedy hits my life, after circumstances bring me down to reality, I am more open to truth. If you are having trouble hearing the voice of the Shepherd, the most valuable prayer you can pray is, "Lord, do whatever you have to do to soften my heart. Take me through whatever road necessary that I may become tender to the word you speak."

Thirdly, the call of the Lord upon our lives is a call to the service of the living God.

For the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace and to them he said "You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you," so they went.
Matthew 20:1-4

The Master did not say, "I'm going to send you for ten weeks to a seminar ... then you'll know how to serve God ... you go to Bible college ... then you'll know how to serve God ... I want to check you out a little more ... give you some more instructions." He said, "Go ... go in the shape you are right now and function in the place where I put you." What is the Kingdom of God ... what is this vineyard we are to work in, but simply to share God's mercy in the place where we find ourselves at any given moment?

Some of us are still waiting for the angel to come and say, "Go to Australia." And we won't go anywhere until the angel tells us Australia ... because that's where we want to go. But what makes you think you're going to serve God in Australia if you're not doing a thing for him here? Is it not true that there are people who need to hear a good word from your lips in the place where you are now? ... who need to see something that will give them hope? ... who need to see evidence of love, mercy, kindness, goodness from your life and your actions? "Oh, I can't do anything, I'm only a piece of junk ... I'm not a Cadillac." But when the piece of junk answers the call of the Lord and begins to serve the living God where it is, it's no longer a piece of junk ... it is the habitation of the living God.

We have this treasure in earthen vessels in order that the transcendent power may be known to be of God.
(2 Corinthians. 4:7)

The call of the Lord upon our lives is a call to death.

If anyone would come after me let him deny himself, take up his cross every day, and follow me. Matthew 16:24

And what does it mean to deny yourself every day and take up your cross every day, but to die every day. And to die every day is not morbid. It means that I come out of this ridiculous self that I am ... that I come forth into freedom once again. This only happens if I die every day, deny myself and go forth into him who is meek and lowly of heart and who lives, not for his own will, but for the will of the heavenly Father.

Most of us are so full of self that we're of little use to God. We merely have to walk into a room ... we don't even have to open our mouths ... and our presence fills that room. Everybody knows we're there. We may play a "meek and humble" role, yet somehow everybody knows we're there. Until we learn how important it is to die ... until we understand how essential this is, that we die every day, we're going to be of little use to God's kingdom.

The people who are growing in their ministries, who are getting better at it, who are becoming effective, who are bearing fruit, who are coming through the storm stronger every time, are the ones who answer the call of the Lord to die. "Lord, I don't understand what this means, but I know I need it ... help me to die with you."

And finally, the call of Jesus upon our lives is a call to life.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour is coming and now is when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear (that is, who listen, who respond) shall live." John 5:25

"My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me and I give to them eternal life." John 10:27-28

Just as surely as we go down into the grave with Jesus with our sins, we also come up out of that grave by his power to live a life which is as radically different from what we were before as life differs from death.

This is eternal life, to know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent ... John 17:3

To be alive is to know God ... to know God right now. Not last week, but now. Not that marvelous experience you had in January, but to know the living God now. And to this Jesus calls every single one of us. "You were a faithful servant last week, but right now you need to come out of

your old dead self --- into me," says Jesus to every one of us. He extends the call to each of us and it's up to us to answer it. Peter left his fishing ... Matthew his tax collecting ... the woman at the well set down her water jar and went to do what Jesus said --- to follow him. Mary Magdalene left her seven devils. Now the Lord calls us to leave what we are and what we have and all these things that cling to our hearts. "Come, I have something far better."

And suddenly the junk yard is no longer a graveyard but a place where resurrection miracles begin to occur as men and women rise up and answer the call of the Master. As they do, they change.

So if you hear the call of the Shepherd to your heart ... answer it ... answer it in whatever way that is meaningful to you ... answer it sitting in that chair ... answer it kneeling on the floor... don't close this book until you've answered it. As you do, you will experience new life ... resurrection life ... this day.

EFFECTIVE

*I have glorified thee on the earth:
I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do.
John 17:4 KJV*

If the servant is truly as his Lord, then it follows that when he arrives at the end of his journey on earth he should be able to say as the Master did, "***I have accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do.***" The apostle Paul was not embarrassed to say, "***I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.***" Paul had been given a job to do. He did it, and now he was ready to go on.

If we were to be told quite clearly by the Lord that we have only a few months left in this world of flesh and blood, would we not be inclined to panic? "Please, Lord, not yet! I haven't done anything. I haven't been effective ... give me some more time!"

Please understand that I am not talking about salvation. Salvation is a gift and can be received in a split second. Any person who desires salvation needs only to turn away from the old ways of self and throw his/her life on the mercy of the Lamb, trusting his death and resurrection, relying on his ever-present Spirit ... and the new life of a child of God has begun.

But now that you are God's child, there is work to be done. The redemption of this world, bought and paid for by the blood of the Lamb, only becomes reality through us. We are the salt, the light, the aroma of Christ to God among men.

*"You did not choose me, I chose you, and appointed you that you should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain."
(John 15:16)*

Is there such a thing as being saved and useless? How long are we allowed to be ineffective servants and still remain servants? What will the master do when he calls us to account for what we did with the talent he gave us and all we can do is dig it up? To be saved and ineffective is meaningless. Does not our Lord himself say that every branch in him that bears no fruit is cut off and thrown into the fire?

Paul may have experienced a considerable amount of suffering, pain and anguish in his ministry... but Paul was never plagued by doubts about his effectiveness. Paul knew that he was accomplishing something. In the very midst of numberless problems, disappointments and failures, Paul knew that he was bearing fruit.

For all the weeping our Lord did over the hardness of Jerusalem's heart, he never shed a tear over a lack of effectiveness. Jesus, the Son of Man,

knew that he was effective. John the Baptist had his doubts, the disciples were not always sure ... but Jesus knew.

"My meat and drink is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work ..."
John 4:34

"Go and tell John again the things which you see and hear. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up and the poor have good news preached to them."
Matthew 11:4

There is no reason why we can't be equally certain, day-after-day, that we are doing the work we've been given to do and that we are effective ... things are getting done ... fruit is being borne. There is no reason for us to forever be up in the air and in doubt about these things. Do you think the laborers in the vineyard were having nervous breakdowns about their calling, forever wondering if they were in the right vineyard? Having an identity crisis with every bunch of grapes they pick? Do you think that the servant who comes in from the field, girds himself and makes supper for his master has time to indulge in soul-searching as to whether he should really have been working in the field that day? And when we sit around and agonize as to whether we're in the right place in the kingdom it's a sure sign that we are not effectively doing the job we've already been given. We are destroying our own effectiveness by doubting our call. Actually we are doubting the faithfulness of the One who sent us forth and has promised to be our guide.

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."
John 20:19-23

...***"As the Father has sent me, so I send you."*** Now if he, Jesus, sent me, how can I be anything but effective? If he ordained me to go and bring forth fruit, how can it be any other way? This ought to be our rock bottom confidence ... that in the name of Jesus and in the power of his Spirit we shall turn men and women from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God.

We don't hire somebody to do this for us ... nor do we send another in our place. We are to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world, the city set upon a hill, beginning where we are. If we are faithful where we are and the time comes when our Lord wants us in China or Pakistan or Egypt, he will make it clear. We are to know that we are servants of the living God, ambassadors of the Messiah ... and we labor in the place where he puts us, knowing that our labor is effective.

Then why do so many of us feel so useless so much of the time? Because we take our eyes off the One who called us and the work he called us to do and fix them on other people. We compare ourselves with them, measure ourselves against them, and soon we're caught up in their work instead of our own. This leads to three diseases which undermine our effectiveness as servants of the Lord:

1. The Celebrity Syndrome. In this set of symptoms the Kingdom of God is distorted into a Christian Hollywood where the common folk fulfill their lives vicariously by following the activities of the stars. You turn on your Christian radio station and find out what Christian celebrities will be passing through town this week. Then you buy your ticket for the latest Christian rock concert, or make reservations at the Hilton where a well-known brother will speak at the Christian Businessmen's Supper Club. Or you run to a meeting where Sister Total will speak on Christian Womanhood and will also autograph copies of her latest book.

These may be dedicated, committed people. But they are being used by Satan at least to this extent: they are allowing themselves to be portrayed as more important ... their ministry and work as of more value than that of the numerous unknown people who faithfully serve. Our Lord relentlessly teaches that this is not to happen among us. The greatest among us must be the least ... the leader as one who is a lowly servant ... as a slave.

There is no such thing as a Christian celebrity. Those who allow themselves to be cast in that role are robbing glory from the living God. There is only one big name among us ... the name of Jesus ... the One who made himself the lowest of all. You will never take your work seriously, (the work Jesus himself gave you to do), nor will you do it effectively so long as your mind is dazzled by any name other than the name of the lowliest man who ever walked this earth.

2. Be on guard against the Success Syndrome. Voices are being raised right now which say in effect that if you really get hold of the gospel from the right end, everything you touch will turn to success. We need to note the difference between bearing fruit and being a success. You were called and ordained to bear fruit for the Kingdom of God ... and you will. But the way of bearing fruit is not the way of success, but the way of death.

"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it; but he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."
John 12:24-25

You are going to be falling into the ground and dying every day. You are going to fail in the eyes of men again and again. And you will willingly lose your life as you walk a path that takes you through devastating problems, tosses and turns on waves of disruptive circumstances. And in the process you will bear much fruit that the Father may be glorified.

3. Watch out for the "Christian Heavy" Syndrome. These are the folks on the other end of the spectrum who spurn big names and would rather spit than be a success. But what a production they make out of their "total commitment to the Lord." It's as if they are the only ones in the world who really love Jesus ... as if they are the sole preservers of the New Testament Christianity ... they are the only true believers left. If you get caught up in their world you will never bear any lasting fruit. You will be far too busy being really heavy ... really serious ... and weeping over everyone else's apostasy.

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."
John 20:19-23

If you have met Jesus alive from the dead ... if he has given you his peace ... if he has breathed on you and told you to receive the Holy Spirit, be sure of this: he has sent you to do what the Father sent Him to do. Jesus has sent you to touch lives with forgiveness in his name ... to warn the impenitent of judgment in his name ... to lay down your life in his name. You can do that every day wherever you are. And you can know that as you do, you are effective ... you will bear fruit.

When the end comes may we be able to say to the Father through the Son,

"I have glorified thee on earth, I have accomplished the work thou gavest me to do."
John 17:4

THE FINGER OF GOD

"...Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul. And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you...." Luke 11:17-20

When Jesus talks about casting out demons by the finger of God, he's describing his ministry and ours. Every one reading these words who is now a follower of Jesus is called to that kind of ministry ... a ministry that could best be described as one in which the finger of God is operative. Most of us have a watered-down and weak idea of the ministry to which we've been called. Even our modern day Christian heroes are often weak specimens of the ministry to which every single one of us has been called. Who do we think of as a successful Christian worker? So often, it's somebody who starts a church which quickly grows to a thousand members ... or somebody who begins a new movement or opens a new mission field. Then they write a book about their life.

We've been called to minister with the finger of God, and as we do, we move in a realm which is not visible to the human eye ... which abhors human glory. In this realm we are driven by one desire: to be so alive to God that we are able to fit in with the mysterious movements of his kingdom. Again and again we find ourselves in the right place at the right time ... able to touch some life with God's mercy or visit it with healing or to drive away evil with God's finger.

This is the kind of ministry our Lord had. It was not flashy even though healings took place in abundance. Jesus was so sensitive to his Father that he always was at the right place at the right time making the most of every opportunity that came his way ... right up to the cross. To the apostles he gave the same authority. They likewise fit in with God's movements so that in the ordinary daily round these men and women did supernatural things. But the whole view of these things is so bent out of shape by modern slick Christianity that it's very difficult for us to even grasp the concept of ministering with the finger of God.

Perhaps people who had the clearest sense of what this is were the Hassidic Jews of roughly two centuries ago. These people were living under oppression, (from nominal Christians). As they sought refuge in a relationship with God, the Hassidim, (pious ones), would cluster around a Tzadik, (a righteous one). It was believed that the Tzadik was so single-mindedly devoted to God that it mattered little whether people admired him or what

happened in the world around him. Wherever this man went angels opened the way. He could read hearts and heal and drive away evil. The Hassidim tended to draw their strength from the Tzadik. Conversely the Hassidim gave their strength back to the Tzadik and ministered through him. It was as if only the Tzadik worked the works of God while the Hassidim stood apart as spectators.

But suppose that instead of having one worker of wonders surrounded by a congregation of Hassidim who watch and admire, we have one Hassid, (merciful one), who somehow transforms every life that touches his into a worker of divine wonders ... a vine sustaining many branches which bear fruit that abides forever. This is precisely what Jesus does to those lives that truly unite themselves to his ... he transforms each one into a Tzadik, (a righteous one), and sends us forth to touch human lives with the finger of God.

You did not choose me, I chose you and ordained you that you should go and bring forth fruit. John 15:16

We have been ordained by Jesus to accomplish much more than what we have thought of as our normal Christian life. We have been sent to perform the redemptive work of the Lord in the time that is left. We are to do exactly what the legendary Tzadik was to do: to be in the right place at the right time ... to so touch human lives that the broken image of God in their hearts is restored.

And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues ... they will lay their hands on the sick and they will recover. Mark 16:17-18

God has indeed given us a grace that brings light to people and that conveys peace wherever it goes. And once we yield to that grace, we turn our backs on slick churchianity and get on with the work of a ministry hidden by the hand of God, but shining with the true glory.

The same Jesus who calls us to the ministry of the finger of God also warns us that there are certain things which will threaten this ministry. There are areas where we have to be on our guard. If we flounder in any of these areas we may still build churches and draw crowds and write books, but we will no longer be able to touch human lives with God's finger.

1. The relationship between woman and man. Before you came into the Kingdom of God and were given this ministry you may have been married five times. Perhaps you lived in the gay bars. You may have been a porno addict or read True Romance every night before you went

to bed. But now that you've come into the kingdom and have been given this ministry, your relationship with the opposite sex must be absolutely right in God's sight. When Jesus talks about marriage and divorce, or when Jesus warns of the danger of lust, he's not putting his finger in a condemning way on your past...your past is under the blood. He is talking about your present.

Each of us is either a eunuch for the Kingdom of God, (you're living a single life in all purity, sustained by God's grace), or you are married ... or on your way to marriage. If you're married or on your way to marriage then your relationship with your mate must be sanctified by the love of God in you, so that in your relationship with your mate, (or the one who will ultimately be your mate), God comes first. And, you are careful to love your mate with the same merciful, forgiving, self-giving love that has been shown to you in the Lord. Your relationship with your mate is absolutely pure. You are true to your mate, not only in your actions, but in your imagination and your thought. If we allow ourselves leeway in this area, then our ministries are infected by a dangerous compromise. And if we don't quickly remove the infection, they will be destroyed.

2. The way we handle money. Jesus puts much emphasis on the fact that we must handle mammon in such a way that it is clear --- to God and to ourselves --- that we are serving, not mammon, but God.

He who is faithful in very little is faithful also in much. And he who is dishonest in a very little, is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. Luke 16:10-13

The Pharisees who were lovers of money heard all this and scoffed. But he said to them,

"You are those who justify yourselves before men but God knows your hearts... For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God." Luke 16:15

We see Jesus watching the widow putting her two pence in the treasury of institutional Israel, and he did not condemn her for it ... he honored her. In his parable of the good Samaritan Jesus makes clear that the Samaritan not only spent time on that wounded Jew, but money ... the equivalent of two days wages. "And if you spend more," he says to the innkeeper, "when I come back I will repay you." And he will keep his commitment.

How many ministries are stunted because we are irresponsible ... unfaithful to God in our use of money! And how many ministries suffer because we allow ourselves to be deceived by money! We think that money is the answer. "If we have more money we can do more good." We start to beg for it, we worry about it, we put stock in it ... we think that money is our security. We will not minister effectively with the finger of God if we are irresponsible in our use of money or if we are lured by money and begin to lust after it.

3. Anxiety about tomorrow. There are two ways that you can face tomorrow ...with anxiety, or with faith in God. When we're anxious about tomorrow, we start to worry about what we shall eat, what we shall drink, what we're going to put on, what's going to happen to us tomorrow. "Maybe I'll get sick ... perhaps I'll have an accident ... what if I am caught in one of those tornadoes... what if there's a war?" Who knows? Maybe all these things will happen. The Lord doesn't promise us anything about tomorrow except that he will be there --- if we walk with him. Whatever you're going to need to face the 5th of March of next year, you're going to have on the 5th of March, next year. But not now. On the 5th of March, next year, you will have what you need, if you walk with Jesus.

If we face tomorrow with anxiety, if we don't see this as sin and repent of it, then our ministry weakens. But if we face tomorrow with the help of the Lord, admitting our anxieties to him, crying, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!" ... if we walk into tomorrow trusting him and throwing our anxieties upon him, we go from strength to strength.

4. A critical attitude. The Lord who says, "Judge not and you will not be judged, condemn not and you will not be condemned," means what he says. We cannot minister effectively if we're sitting in the Judgment Seat which belongs only to God. We love to think of ourselves as Jesus' disciples. But when we indulge in the habit of being cynical about everything we see that fails to support our ego's view of things, we put ourselves out of the ranks of disciples and in the ranks of the scribes and Pharisees.

"Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye and fail to behold the log that is in your own eye?"
Matthew 7:3

For many of us it's a compulsion. Every time we visit another fellowship, we have no peace until we find a flaw. For some of us it's a habit ... such a habit that we almost think that there's nothing to talk about at the dinner table unless we can find somebody to make fun of or complain about. For many of us it's a habit of thought in our inner "conversations" with ourselves ...we're not happy until we can find somebody we can belittle

or something we can laugh at in a derogatory way. If we're going to minister with the finger of God, this must change, so that the mercy of the Lord which was shown to us begins to color our attitude toward all people ... believers and unbelievers.

5. The unforgiving heart.

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us ... Forgive and you shall be forgiven "If you don't forgive men their trespasses," says Jesus, "neither will your heavenly Father forgive you your trespasses." **Matthew 6:12,15**

What is this gospel that we have but a gospel of forgiveness? What is the finger of God but the finger that lifts the guilt away from us and puts it on himself at Calvary? How can we minister with that finger if we have closed the door of our own hearts to God's mercy by refusing to be forgiving toward one other soul? No doubt this is the reason why God throws us together in fellowship with people of different backgrounds, in order that we might learn to be forgiving. Of course we are going to irritate each other and rub each other the wrong way and try one another's patience ... so we are compelled to learn to forgive! God doesn't send us out on the roads of this world like lonely Tzadiks ... he sends us forth as part of a specific congregation where we are continuously learning to forgive. The more effective we become at forgiving one another the wrongs that are done to us ... or that we think have been done to us ... the more freely and mightily the grace of God flows forth to the world. If we're walking around with a chip on our shoulder how can we turn around and bring life to the world?

"If I cast out demons by Beelzebul by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore shall they be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." **Matthew 12:27-28**

These signs shall accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover. **Mark 16:17-18**

So then the Lord Jesus after he had spoken to them was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God and they went forth and preached everywhere while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message with signs that attended it. **Mark 16:19-20**

WITH ALL YOUR HEART

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord your God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that he is one, and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." Mark 12:28-34

The first time it happened, no one seemed to pay much attention. But soon it became an epidemic. One Sunday afternoon around three o'clock a fine new suburban church building simply collapsed. There was no fire and no explosion ... it just crumbled together as if a huge unseen foot had stepped on it. Some urban believers were slightly amused when they read about it in the paper. The following Sunday an inner city church suffered the same fate ... the magnificent architecture which had drawn tourists for generations became rubble in a few seconds. This caused some gloating among some non-institutional Christians who took pride in the fact that they never met in church buildings. The following Sunday these "New Testament" Christians had barely emerged from their house meeting when the house fell to the ground.

As the investigators began to probe, they learned that in each instance the congregation had been visited on the day of their building's collapse by an elderly man who was described by witnesses as having "wild looking eyes." Was it Elijah? Congregations began to watch the door apprehensively, wondering if today this strange visitor would find his way to them.

One Sunday morning the elderly man with "wild looking eyes" turned up before the service at a church which had a reputation for laying heavy emphasis on total commitment and discipleship. One of the brothers approached the stranger.

"Sir, we're all petrified. We know what has happened to the building of every congregation you've visited. We know this is some form of judgment ... but for what? Where were they found wanting?"

"They were judged," answered the stranger, "for their mediocrity. Mediocre prayers ... mediocre lives ... lukewarm hearts ... lazy minds. The living God has given these people his very best. In love God has given them all he has: his only begotten Son ... purchased them back from the curse of the second death with Jesus' blood. And what do they give back to God? ...their scraps ... their leftovers. Would that they were either hot or cold. But because they are lukewarm he spews them out of his mouth!"

"Well," answered the Christian from the 'total commitment' church, "on that basis we should pass the test. There isn't a church in town that preaches a tougher message on commitment than ours."

At 3:00 p.m. the church collapsed like all the rest.

***....and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength ... and your neighbor as yourself.
Matthew 22:37,39***

Of course the judgment, which has already begun at the house of God, does not concern itself with buildings of brick and steel ... but it does concern itself with the kingdoms we build which are not the Kingdom of God at all. It is possible for me to be very earnest about building a name for myself, or a new form of religious community, or a reputation for my church ... while my heart toward God remains lukewarm. One day all the things I have built out of earnestness for myself, (while my inmost heart for God was lukewarm), will indeed come down.

Suppose the Master of the house returns to the servants to whom he has given talents to find the five talent man in high elation ... he has a surprise for the Master. Instead of delivering five talents more for the five he had received, he says,

"Master, come into the yard, I have something wonderful to show you. You gave me five talents. I amassed fifteen more. With the twenty talents I made this..."

He pulls out a chord and unveils a bronze statue of himself holding a Bible. The Master orders him into outer darkness.

The vast bulk of all the things we like to think we have done for the Lord were done, not for him, but for ourselves. Consider how in our thought life, our prayer life, our business life and family life, whatever is excellent is reserved for ourselves ... God gets the mediocre.

Cain brings an offering which may appear acceptable to every eye but God's. God sees this offering as the expression of a lukewarm heart. And

this mediocre offering is not an offering even as mediocre prayer is not prayer. Any half-baked mediocre thing we bring to God is worse than if we brought nothing ... it is blasphemy.

When the merciful and living God decided to deliver us from the curse of death and the bondage of Satan, he did not go to the spiritual junk yard and look for the wreckage of some ruined angel. He took the best he had ... the Son who lived in his very bosom ... his supreme joy and only treasure ... his best ... to redeem us. And when the Son of God appeared clothed in human flesh, did he yawn and say to himself, "Well, what else can I do? I'll shuffle through this somehow."? He put himself into it with all his heart, soul, mind and strength ... everything he did was quality.

If you have doubts about the person of Jesus, read the Sermon on the Mount in any language. How can any thinking person doubt that this is the most beautiful and penetrating arrangement of words ever to touch this earth? And when Jesus healed, he made sure the healing was complete. The blind man whose vision was imperfect after the first touch was touched again. When Jesus fed the multitudes he fed them with abundance. When he laid down his life he laid it down with all his heart. And when we ask Jesus to touch our lives, his touch is perfect.

Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; Who healeth all thy diseases; Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; Who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies; Who satisfieth thy mouth with good things; So that thy youth is renewed like the eagle's.

Psalm 103:3-5

But the blessing has to be received as it is given ... with the whole heart. Nothing Jesus has done for you will have any lasting effect until you take hold of it with all your heart ... with all your soul ... with all your mind and with all your strength.

And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that he is one, and there is no other but him, and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." ***Mark 12:32-34***

If we want to live in God's kingdom now ... as opposed to our own religious kingdoms which will surely crumble ... here are three simple things to keep in mind:

1. Put your heart into receiving God's mercy. The mercy of God cannot flow into a half-opened heart. Yet how many times when the Son of God knocks on the door we're afraid to open it more than a crack. "What if he puts his foot in?" Have no fear. The Lord will not force his way in ... he will not enter until you open the door wide and bid him welcome.

This opening of the heart to receive the Lord's mercy needs to be done daily ... hourly ... until it becomes our second nature to draw our life and our strength from him who is the incarnation of divine mercy.

*My soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee
in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is. Psalm 63:1*

2. Put your heart into your daily prayers. Some of us pray with our mouths ...some of us put in the time while our minds wander the earth. How easily for all of us it is to slip from prayer into a journey through the past, or into some pressing anxiety, or even into sleep. And the reason is that we are not approaching the Throne with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. We need to put our best into it even if we have to begin by saying; "Lord, I don't know how to pray ... help me!" When such a cry begins to rise from the heart, the answer is already on its way.

3. Put your heart into showing mercy to your neighbor. How often we find ourselves half listening to some one who is pouring out their soul ... we simply are not putting our heart into it. Or, we catch ourselves going through the motions of good deeds while our hearts are tepid. What a change takes place in the quality of our work in the vineyard when we approach our neighbor's need with a merciful heart ... an alert and thoughtful mind!

Perhaps we feel that we have been placed in a boring corner of the vineyard. The people who come to us with their needs are so uninteresting, so hopeless! "Will they ever come out of that rut? Will they ever change?" But what a refreshing wind begins to blow through these relationships when we put our hearts into them and begin dealing with these people as before the eye of a Lord who loves them with the same unspeakable love which has transformed us. When our hearts are in it, God is in it ... redemptive grace flows in abundance.

God who gave his best ... his everything ... his only begotten ... to redeem us and make us his children waits for us as we are right now, (for all our hang-ups and problems), to love him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to show our appreciation for the death and resurrection of Jesus by loving our neighbors as ourselves ... by showing mercy.

If we will do that, when Elijah comes, the structure will stand.

HENCEFORTH YOU WILL BE CATCHING MEN

While the people pressed upon him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret. And he saw two boats by the lake; but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. And when he had ceased speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." And when they had done this, they enclosed a great shoal of fish; and as their nets were breaking, they beckoned to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." For he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the catch of fish which they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men." Luke 5:1-10

When our eyes open and we find ourselves walking in fellowship with the Son of God we can only marvel at how it all happened. "How did I come out of my darkness into this light?" Is it not true that we found our way to Jesus the same way those fish found their way into Peter's net?...we were drawn.

"No man can come to me except the Father which has sent me draw him."

John 16:44 KJV

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto myself."

John 12:32

And notice how Jesus drew us to himself. It was not through angels but through some human being. Somebody talked to us ... put a book in our hand ... brought us to the right place at the right time ... prayed for us. Those fish didn't get into Peter's boat by jumping out of the water and flopping in. Peter had to lower the net ... then God drew. And after the fish were drawn into the net Peter had to raise it up. So Peter fished and God drew. And in the same way somebody was fishing and we were drawn by God ... but it was through their fishing.

Marvelous as was the miracle of those fish in the boat, the far greater miracle was the four men who found their way into God's kingdom that

day ... Peter, Andrew, James and John. The instant Peter finds himself drawn into God's net of mercy, Jesus speaks a word to him which may surprise us.

Jesus did not say, "Now Peter, you're saved."

But rather, "Now Peter, you're going to be catching men."

The instant we find ourselves in God's kingdom he immediately makes us the means by which somebody else is drawn in. The only saints who survive are those who allow themselves to be the means by which other people are drawn ... those who bear fruit.

Every branch of mine that bears no fruit he takes away.
John 15:2

To every believer the address of the Lord is, "Don't be afraid ... from now on you are going to be catching men." Of course we're not going to be catching men if we don't fish. But when we begin to fish we find it happening exactly like it did for Peter.

Perhaps a reader is wondering, "Does this mean that if I'm going to be a fisher of men I have to go out on the street with tracts? Do I have to grab people by the collar and ask them if they're saved? Do I have to turn the conversation in everybody's living room to 'spiritual things'? Do we have to behave in such a way that people dread to see us approaching?" The answer of course is, No. God doesn't draw people into his kingdom by means of our religious antics. He draws people into his kingdom by means of his mercy ... while we fish. And fishing is a very simple thing. It can be described in four steps. Two are internal and two are external.

To fish for men begins by taking an essential step within our own hearts ... getting a vision of the Lamb of God.

When John the Baptist said, "*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,*" and multitudes of people from his own disciples left John and go with Jesus, John's eyes were hardly on the audience ... they were on the Lamb of God ... he was looking at Jesus. It was because John himself had a burning vision of who this was that his words had such authority. It is only as we allow ourselves to be drawn to Jesus that we can become the means by which others are drawn to him.

In practical life this means that we discipline ourselves daily and hourly to turn our minds away from self and on to him ... that we think him, eat, sleep, drink and delight in him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself. Perhaps the most successful fisher of men that ever lived was the apostle Paul. Note that Paul's primary concern after years of

catching men and women for the Kingdom of God, was not that he would "win souls" but that he would win Christ.

That I might win Christ and be found in him...That I might know him in the power of his resurrection, the fellowship of his sufferings, and be made like him in his death.

Philippians 3:8b,10

For me to live is Christ, to die is gain.

Philippians 1:21

It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

Galatians 2:20

The people who are going to be used by God to draw others into his kingdom are those who are truly finding rest under the yoke of Jesus ... who are learning from him to be meek and lowly of heart ... who are receiving their satisfaction from knowing him. He's the one who satisfies.

The next step in this process of fishing for men is also interior. We now begin to line up our desires with God's ... through prayer.

There's not one of us who "in the natural" has any desire to see people drawn into the Kingdom of God ... we don't care. We might want to see more people in our churches or in our Bible studies. Many of us are lusting for numbers. We love to collect people the way stamp collectors collect stamps or coin collectors collect coins. But when we spend time with God, this begins to change and we find our motives and desires beginning to conform to the heart of God. This change can be observed in Peter as we see him portrayed in the New Testament.

Looking at Peter in the opening verses of Luke 5, we see Peter's main concern is fish ... he loves to fish. He fished, not only for a living, but for joy. Yet soon we see Peter spending more time with God. In the book of Acts we see Peter depicted as one who devotes himself to prayer. "We will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word." In Chapter 10, we find him up on the roof top of the house, praying. As Peter immerses himself in the Spirit through prayer, people are drawn to the Kingdom of God by just getting under his shadow. By the time we get to the Peter who writes those epistles, we see a man who is rejoicing at seeing souls finding their way from darkness to light ... rejoicing at the mercy of God which has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

When we spend time seeking God --- daily seeking God --- we discover that God begins to inflame our hearts with his desires. To our own amazement we find ourselves weeping for Jerusalem ... longing after

those multitudes ... yearning to see people brought from darkness into light. When this begins to be the state of our hearts, then we are ready for the next step.

The third step brings us into the external realm: letting down the net.

To let down the net is to enter into the stream of God's word by some kind of redemptive labor. At the command of God we begin to do things in the place where we find ourselves that will be signs to people around us that God loves them. Simple things. Our Lord let down the net by healing the sick, opening the eyes of the blind, listening to their problems, relieving their guilty conscience. And now we hear him sending us forth to manifest God's mercy ... proclaim the kingdom ... heal the sick. Pray for that man. Give that woman an encouraging word. Minister to that child's need. Listen when that neglected soul wants somebody to talk to. When these simple things are done at the word of the Lord they become the net into which God draws living souls.

And he called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God, and to heal. And he said to them, "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not have two tunics. And whatever house you enter, stay there, and from there depart. And wherever they do not receive you, when you leave that town shake off the dust from your feet as a testimony against them." And they departed and went through the villages, preaching the gospel and healing everywhere.
Luke 9:1-6

In other words, "Rely on nothing but me, and go out there and manifest God's kingdom to these people."

After this the Lord appointed seventy others, and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to come. And he said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go your way; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and salute no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace be to this house!' And if a son of peace is there, your peace shall rest upon him; but if not, it shall return to you. And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the laborer deserves his wages; do not go from house to house. Whenever

you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you; heal the sick in it and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'"
Luke 10:1-9

Relying totally on God, we minister to the needs that are before us, believing that as we do God will come in behind us and confirm to those to whom we're ministering that he is indeed working supernaturally, for their blessing.

The final step is: to haul the net up.

To haul up the net is to call people to repentance and faith in Jesus and lift them into God's kingdom. After we have shown men and women God's mercy, then we can say, "Repent ... turn ... open your heart to the Lord." And many to whom we say this will respond in ways that will astound us. We can be bold ... we don't have to be timid. There are people who are actually waiting for somebody to say, "Turn! Come! Open your heart! Let the Lord come in."

They will respond. With joy they will bound into God's kingdom. When Jesus says, "Now lift the net," we will be astonished at the catch.

The same Lord who said to Peter, "*Don't be afraid. From now on you're going to be catching men,*" includes us in this promise:

if we will keep our eyes on the Lamb,

and **if** we will immerse our hearts in God in prayer that we may line up our desires with his,

and **if** we will go out and truly do redemptive work in the place where we find ourselves,

and **if** we will have the boldness to call people to repent and believe.

GOING FORTH

*When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion:
we were like them that dream.
Then was our mouth filled with laughter: and our
tongue with singing. Then said they among the heathen:
The Lord hath done great things for them.
The Lord hath done great things for us: whereof we are glad.
Turn again our captivity, O Lord: as the streams in the south.
They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.
He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed:
shall doubtless come again with rejoicing,
bringing his sheaves with him.* *Psalm 126*

It cannot be stressed too strongly that the major aspect of our ministry is that which goes on alone before God, away from the sight of man. Our ministry begins alone in prayer, in worship, drinking in God's presence ... ever bringing into ourselves a fresh measure of the Spirit. It then rises into intercession. Inevitably our worship of the true God moves us into the essential labor of lifting others before the Throne. The more we engage in this labor the more we appreciate its value. But there comes a time when the seeking of God's face, ministering alone before him, must be followed by a going forth to minister to others.

And the disciples went forth and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them confirming the word with signs following.
Mark 16:20

You come to a point where you take what you have received and go out and do something with it. This does not necessarily mean that you have to catch a plane and go into the jungles of the Amazon, (unless God sends you to do that) ... or that you have to take a soap box and stand down in the city square and preach at the top of your lungs, (unless God sends you to do that). But it does mean for **every one of us** that we go forth from our "spiritual shells."

It begins with a going forth from self. We are hindered from going forth from self by the idea that we first have to acquire an inner feeling of confidence. Didn't the believers on Pentecost go forth into the streets and speak, as the Spirit gave them utterance, without fear? Were they not overflowing with confidence? And did not Peter and John stand before the elders of Jerusalem without self-consciousness? They couldn't but speak the things that they had seen and heard. But we don't feel so confident ... we lack that certainty. We feel that we need to wait for that upsurge within.

Don't ever get the idea that the apostles always waited for confidence to rise within them before acting. While they had days like Pentecost when they were filled with confidence, they also had days when they were scared to death ... but they still ministered.

Consider Paul's ministry in Corinth:

"When I came to you I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling." I Corinthians 2:3

Paul's ministry in Galatia began with an infirmity that was repulsive to look at. God alone knows how many times Paul launched out into strange territory in weakness and fear and in much trembling. We can do the same ... we can go forth from our fragile shell of self even when we are scared, conscious of our weakness, self-conscious ... even when we're weeping.

***They that sow in tears: shall reap in joy.
He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed:
shall doubtless come again with rejoicing,
bringing his sheaves with him.***

We're not going forth to a picnic. While the work we've been given to do is awesome in its power to transform lives, this work is done against the background of an evil which is so far-reaching and so over-whelming and so utterly clever and subtle that we can't possibly begin to grasp it with our minds much less cope with it in ourselves. We are announcing the word of the living God to a world which is so indifferent, one would feel like sitting down and crying.

If we are going to do this (not in the spirit of "slick-Christianity" which rarely gets close to people who suffer and hurt), but in the lowliness of our Lord Jesus (who always stayed close to the hurting ones), it is often going to be like beating our heads against a wall. It is often going to seem as if any minute our fragile ship of faith is going to sink and be forgotten in a sea of indifference.

For every time we go forth with confidence there will be nine times when our going forth appears to be without promise of fruit. We need to learn to accept the indifference, the hostility, the sneers and the derision as normal; knowing that if we keep going ... even though we weep and tremble ... the outcome will be supernatural, lasting, holy, abundant fruit.

***He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed:
shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his
sheaves with him.***

A woman in our fellowship was sent into the next world through the bullet of a thief. As her body crumpled to the floor this woman doubtless entered into a liberty and into a relationship with Jesus so clear and so wonderful we can't begin to conceive it ... there was a going forth through death into life. In a similar way, every time we go out of ourselves, expose ourselves in the name of Jesus, to situations that make us conscious of our weakness and of our inadequacy, we also taste life. For instance, your favorite uncle thinks you're a wonderful person until you reveal that you've become a believer. His verdict: "Ever since you started this Jesus stuff you've turned into a creep." Consider the death we experience when we open our mouth to talk with our best friend about the Lord. Consider the risk of rejection when we offer to pray for someone who is sick. We write a letter to ask for forgiveness and we mail it with trembling hand. There is no such thing as going out of ourselves and not dying.

We are going forth weeping. There is no way that you're going to plant the living seed in dry ground unless you water it with your tears. Somebody says, "Wait a minute. Isn't the water that's supposed to make this seed sprout and grow the water of the Holy Spirit?"

Of course it's the water of the Holy Spirit. But have you never noticed the connection between the coming of the Holy Spirit into dry ground and the shedding of your tears? Without the shedding of tears ... without some kind of concern on your part ... nothing's going to happen. Jerusalem will not be visited by the redemptive power of God simply by your criticizing Jerusalem, making fun of Jerusalem, standing aloof from it saying, "I want no part of those hypocrites!" The only thing that's going to bring the redemptive power of God to Jerusalem is when someone starts to care enough about Jerusalem to cry over her. The Lord who answered the heart-cry of the widow of Nain when he saw her weeping and raised her son from the dead, the Lord who said, "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted," and the Lord who himself wept over the city, is waiting for some evidence in us that we care enough to weep --- whether inwardly or outwardly.

A lot of people are complaining about our cities and our nation, but how many people are weeping for them? Many are condemning the church, but how many people are weeping for the church? And what about that one person to whom you know God has sent you? ... that twisted, warped, sick life. You can analyze that person. You can say, "He's lazy ... he's a slob ... she's a gossip," but the Lord is waiting to see whether we'll ever get to the place where we'll begin to see that person with his eyes. When we see that person with his eyes we're going to start to weep. Granted we're going to hold on to the cross as we do this or we'll be so

overwhelmed with what we see we'll sink under it. But when our eyes are open so that we begin to see as the Lord sees, there is nothing we can do but weep. And if we can't do anything else we can pray, "Lord, give a vision, of what you see until it's so overwhelming ... until it so burdens my heart ... that I too join you in weeping over Jerusalem. Break this hard heart! Help me, Lord, to have your heart!"

Not crocodile tears, but tears of the heart. Perhaps nothing runs down our cheeks but God knows the tears within.

We go forth bearing precious seed. What a difference it makes when we rely on the one thing that will bring light ... the one thing that will bring healing: precious seed, seed that has life in itself. You drop it in, and wherever there's a response, it takes root ... it begins to grow. The Lord has given us *"the tongue of the learned, that we might learn to speak a word in season to him who is weary."*

You have been given a word, and that word will not return to God void if it's spoken in God's Spirit, and in obedience to him. It will accomplish that to which it is sent, and every life to whom you speak that word will be changed in some way ... the life which has heard will never be the same. Even if it does not respond, even if it turns its back and walks away, that life is never the same again. What an awesome thing! There are people who have heard the word of God from your mouth, have turned their backs and walked away, but they will never be able to say, "Lord, I didn't know."

We go forth, knowing that we're going to come back with our arms loaded with harvested grain. Just as surely as Jesus died for our sins and rose for our justification ... just as surely as he poured out his Spirit upon his people, and is pouring out his Spirit upon you as you read ... and just as surely as he is sending us forth ... so surely there will be a response. There's no such thing as going out there with this word and coming back with nothing. The more generously you sow, the more abundantly you will reap. The more freely you give forth what God has given you, the more freely you're going to find yourself bringing redeemed, God-praising, God-serving, God-glorifying people to the temple of God ... to the table of the Lord. You will see results! You may not see results today or tomorrow or the day after ... you may go for years seeing nothing. But make no mistake, the day will come when all those years of serving by faith will be rewarded with armloads of ripe grain. You will return to the Father's house loaded down with an abundance of lives that have found the living God.

In Isaiah 53 Jesus is described by Isaiah as the suffering servant who "shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied." And what does he see as he looks out over his flock right now? Jesus sees the result, the fruit, of the travail of his soul ... lives that have been radically changed. The only explanation for it is the travail of the soul of the Messiah dying on that cross. You and I are living proof that his blood gives life. What a joy this brings to him and to all heaven! And now he sends us forth to enter the ministry of his cross. As we go out of ourselves into his death ... and as we begin to weep with him ... and as we begin to speak his living word ... we will see the fruit of the travail of his soul.

***He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed:
shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his
sheaves with him.***

SOWING BESIDE ALL WATERS

Until the spirit be poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness be a fruitful field, and the fruitful field be counted for a forest. Then judgment shall dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness remain in the fruitful field. And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance for ever. And my people shall dwell in a peaceable habitation, and in sure dwellings, and in quiet resting places. When it shall hail, coming down on the forest; and the city shall be low in a low place. Blessed are they that sow beside all waters...
Isaiah 32:15-20

The above passage describes what happens when the Spirit of God descends upon his people. The wilderness becomes a fruitful field. First, the Spirit of God brings water into the desert. People who have been hard and unreceptive and closed, under the refreshing presence of the Spirit, begin to soften ... their eyes open and they see the working of God for the first time. Then they begin to sow. They take advantage of the Spirit's presence in the land, and "sow beside all waters."

Has this not been our experience? For a long time it seemed as though we were farming a wilderness. You go out and try to get a response, and nobody's interested. You talk about Jesus and they want to push you away. Then the rain falls, the Spirit of God descends, and the whole situation changes. Suddenly people become receptive ... no longer are we beating our heads against the wall wondering, "What shall I do?" ... "Where can I go that I might get a response?" Now our problem is ... "How are we going to handle the cries that come to us?"

In the places where we work, the neighborhoods where we live, perhaps among our relatives, we're beginning to see a response that we did not see some years back ... or even a few months ago. Never have so many people from so many backgrounds found their way into our fellowships. The same Spirit that creates the fruitful field and causes this response is also about the business of raising up laborers to handle it all. Many of us are hearing the Lord calling us out of our marketplace of spiritual idleness to labor in this fruitful field ... he is fitting us together to get the job done.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers?

Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts.
I Corinthians 12:27-30

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy with cheerfulness.
Romans 12:6-8

But the only way we're going to find out exactly what our function is in the Body is to begin by sowing beside all waters, to grasp the opportunities that are in front of us now.

We don't wait until we get our degree from seminary ... we don't wake up one morning and decide, "I'm a prophet and I'm not going to do anything else in the Body of Christ but prophesy." Or, "I'm an evangelist, don't be asking me to run errands or drive people to the store, visit the sick in the hospitals. I'm called to be an evangelist and that's all I'm going to do." Or, "I'm a teacher, don't ask me to waste my time listening to people's problems. I'm going to concern myself with teaching the living word."

Didn't the apostles say in Acts,

"Look ye out from among you seven men of honest report whom we may appoint over this business of serving tables, but we will devote ourselves to the ministry of the word and to prayer."
Acts 6:3,4

True, but there is sufficient evidence in the book of Acts to assure us that this was not a rigid law ... as if the apostles never helped to distribute what was needed to the widows ... or the seven deacons who were appointed by the apostles did nothing else than serve tables. Stephen, one of the deacons who was called to serve tables, was the first one to be martyred for preaching the word. And Philip, what's he doing up there in Samaria preaching and healing the sick? He's a deacon! Now we find him down on the Gaza Road speaking to the Ethiopian eunuch. What's he doing? He's not supposed to be an evangelist ... he's a deacon! These men and women in the Body began to find where they fit and what they were to do by faithfully sowing beside all waters, using all the opportunities that came their way. And we have to learn to do the same.

Blessed are they that sow beside all waters

Imagine what it would have been like if Philip had said to the Ethiopian eunuch, "I'm sorry, I can't explain Isaiah 53 to you, I'm a deacon. Now if you need a hamburger and a coke, I'll help you out. But you're going to have to wait until you find an evangelist who will open the scripture to you."

On the contrary, Philip took the opportunity that was there. He got up into the man's chariot, opened the scripture to him by the light that Philip had. By the time we get to Acts 21, Philip, one of the seven deacons, is now called Philip the Evangelist. This is not to say that evangelist is higher than deacon. The point is that, as we function in obedience where we are, we will surely find the ministry that God has given us.

We can take the entire ministry of the Body, everything that has to be done, and break it down into seven areas. If we are faithful sowing beside all waters in all of these seven areas, we will begin to find exactly what it is that God wants us to do. There may be one particular area that is our specialty. But don't say; "I'm not going to do anything else." Be faithful ... sow beside all waters ... and you will find what God wants you to do ... how you fit into the Body.

The first area in which we are all called to minister, without any exceptions, is prayer.

The basic ministry to which you and I are called is to pray. First we minister to the Lord before we ever minister to men. And we minister to him in worship and thanksgiving and praise. And as we do this we discover that this is not some extra frill; this is our joy and our life ... it is the source of all our strength. The psalms are a great help in private worship.

As we learn to worship God alone in prayer, we soon come to the place where we begin to intercede effectively for others: We lift people up before the Throne of God and call down God's blessing upon them. We plead the blood over them ... we minister healing and light to them in our prayers by interceding. Mothers and fathers do this for their children by name, every day. And if we pray for our children, our mates, our parents, our brothers and sisters, why stop there? God has set us in a congregation, so we pray for our brothers and sisters in the Body ... by name ... day after day. Now we pray for that person on the job, that neighbor across the street, or that person who's giving us a hard time. And as we exercise our ministry, faithfully, in prayer, sowing beside that waters, we begin to experience life we never knew before.

The second area in which all of us are called to minister, second in importance only to prayer, is simple serving of other people.

We get the idea sometimes that there are certain "Christian peons" ... the little one-talent people ... who are supposed to run the errands, go to the grocery store for others, drive hither and yon, carry things, while others of us are committed to more weighty responsibilities. We're too busy with the important matters of the kingdom to serve in such lowly ways. A dangerous thought! A lie from Satan! Every one of us is called to run errands, to serve in simple ordinary down-to-earth ways all the time.

We're to serve unobtrusively, simply, naturally. If you're too busy to drive people to the doctor, to visit the sick, to help the weak, to put yourself at the disposal of the elderly, if you're too busy doing "more important" things, you're "too important" to get through the door of the Kingdom of God.

The third area where every one of us ... without any exception ... is called to sow beside all waters, is in evangelizing.

As soon as the word "evangelizing" is mentioned people think of an "evangelist" standing at a microphone before 20,000 people. But that's not evangelism at its best. Evangelism at its best is one person dealing directly, faithfully, wooing a single soul to the cross of Jesus. Mass evangelism may have its place, but it is not nearly as important to God as it seems to be to so many Christians. The essential evangelism is one-to-one. It can be done anywhere ... to assure the person on the street corner while you're waiting for the bus, or the one who's crying on the telephone, that the Lord has something good for them. To call them to turn around and let God direct their lives, to point them to Jesus and cause them to hear his merciful voice --- this is basic evangelism,

The fourth area where every one of us is called to minister is in the area of healing.

God didn't give the ministry of healing to celebrities, he gave it to his church ... to every believer.

***These signs shall follow them that believe
They shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover....
Mark 16:17,18***

"You believe in healing? Oh, praise God, I want to take you to a healer I know." No, you, minister healing! Just as surely as you're called to proclaim the good news concerning Jesus to people you meet along the

way, you are also called to believe that the word that you will speak will be confirmed with signs following, as God pleases, in the lives of those who respond to the truth of what you said.

Don't be afraid to lay our hands on somebody who's sick, and pray ... or to point them to the great physician who is Jesus. A healing ministry is imparted to every follower of the Lord. Granted, certain ones are gifted ... certain ones are called to a ministry of healing in the Body that becomes special ... but they will do it the way Jesus does. They will heal and they will say, "Be quiet about it." And if we find ourselves led in that direction, may God give us the wisdom not to make a production out of our gift!

The fifth area to which every one of us is called to minister is in the area of preaching and teaching.

Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature...

Mark 16:15

Go make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you...

Matthew 28:19,20

Does that only apply to the twelve? Obviously the Body of Christ has to do teaching all the time – and that includes all of us.

Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, well versed in scripture. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly, in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and expounded to him the way of God more accurately.

Acts 18:24-26

Here's a beautiful illustration of some people sowing beside all waters. Apollos is doing the very best he can by the light he has. He doesn't say, "I'm not going to do any preaching and teaching until I graduate from Union Seminary." He sows beside all waters with the light he has. Priscilla and Aquila did not demoralize Apollos by saying, "What are you doing preaching? Who called you to preach? Why you don't even know the gospel right!" No ... they took him aside and encouraged him. What wonderful encouragement they gave him because he was faithfully doing what he could do by the light he had.

They did not pour cold water on what Apollos was doing. But they expounded to him the way of God more perfectly. On his side ... notice also ... Apollos doesn't say, "I'll listen to Aquila but I refuse to listen to Priscilla ... she's a woman. Doesn't she know that it says in scripture that women aren't supposed to teach men?" There are occasions when you and I are called to teach, to expound. And if we're faithful and God has something more for us in that area, he'll open doors. It can take place on a bus, a street corner, in your living room, in the lunch room at work, or in a hospital ward. If we will sow beside all waters God will open more doors for us.

The sixth area where every one of us is called to sow beside all waters is in the area of counseling.

Now the term "counseling" as we think of it is not used in scripture that way. Yet, wherever you read in scripture about exhorting or encouraging or rebuking people, listening to one another's problems, you have counseling going on. It went on then as it goes on today. And the equipment we need to be effective in counseling is not the mouth so much as the ear. God will give us the strength to let this ear stretch way out and truly listen to the cry of the heart that's underneath the words that are being spoken to us ... and let the other ear go up toward the Throne for whatever guidance the Lord would have for us. God help us to learn to listen!

Truly to listen to each other and take time with each other and pay attention ... some who draw near to be listened to will be believers and some will be outside the kingdom entirely ... They have a problem. Perhaps it's a marriage problem, a financial problem, a physical problem, a mental hassle ... they desperately need someone to listen. It may well be that the Lord has appointed you to be the listener. And when you have listened well, he may also give you a few words of counsel to share.

Finally, all of us are called into the awesome labor of binding and loosing.

Truly I say to you whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my father who is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them. ***Matthew 18:18-20***

This is normally done in company with another brother, or sister or 'two' or 'three.' We don't usually do this by ourselves. There are spirits that are

harassing and afflicting and condemning and tearing to shreds the minds and hearts of many people. These spirits are to be bound in the same way that our Lord bound them. In his name we are called to loose and set free these souls who are imprisoned and inhibited and paralyzed by their fears, their resentments, their anxieties and self-consciousness. Who of us has not tasted these struggles ourselves?

There can be no other reason why so many troubled and afflicted spirits are being drawn to our fellowships these days. There is no other reason why so many are coming to us, except that God would have his people, in the name of his Son, and by the power of his Spirit, set the captives free ... bind the spirits of evil and loose the children who have been in bondage. Surely he's calling us all today.

"Blessed are they that sow beside all waters."

THE SPIRIT AND POWER OF ELIJAH

Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, it fell to him by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth; for he will be great before the Lord, and he shall drink no wine nor strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." Luke 1:8-17

The man was a Muslim and he came right to the point: "Was Jesus a prophet?" I answered, "He was more than a prophet." And then he said, "What we need right now is a prophet."

It was a beautiful spring day and the city was teeming with people coming and going in all directions. When the Muslim said, "What we need right now is a prophet," he himself was being prophetic, because in fact, the world is about to receive a prophet whose name is Elijah.

There's so much religious talk ... spawning religious cults ... religious busybodies in every office and factory ... religious charlatans on radio and television. People are sick of empty promises and sensational religious exaggerations. When Elijah comes and speaks an authentic word from the living God everybody will know the difference. And even those who reject his message will know ... in their hearts ... that it came from God.

The difference between the Elijah who is to come soon, (in fact his foot is already in the door), and the Elijah of the past is this ... the Elijah of the past was one man standing on Mt. Carmel. John the Baptist was a lone, flaming prophet on the banks of the Jordan. But this Elijah will be an army of men and women covering all the nations of earth. ***"This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come." Matt. 24:14***

Just as Elijah the prophet, centuries and centuries ago, appeared suddenly and shook the northern kingdom of Israel in the days of Ahab ... and just as John the Baptist suddenly shocked the nation down by the Jordan hundreds of years later ... so this last Elijah will suddenly appear in ten thousand places at once. Men and women will show up in every city, every valley, every hillside, every desert on earth. And they will shake the world for the last time. These people will be raised up by God himself; many of them are alive on the earth right now. They will be raised up to do this thing, moved by the Spirit of God. We are being called to be among them; to function together as the earth's last Elijah.

He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

... that's John the Baptist, and that's also us. There were three things that marked John the Baptist as totally different from all the religious teachers and preachers of the land at that hour ... marked him as the one who was indeed going before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah.

First, John the Baptist made people conscious of God. The publicans --- tax collectors --- for instance; normally they weren't conscious of God ... the thing they were supremely conscious of was their money. But when they met John the Baptist, they forgot their money. Suddenly they became strongly aware of God. Many of the religious people of that day were conscious of their religious ideas, their pet religious peeves, but not of God. When they began to hear John the Baptist they forgot all this and became aware of God. Hundreds of people who never got near a synagogue or the temple, went out to John the Baptist, their hearts reaching for God.

So today, there are many people who are "doctrine conscious,"

"Do you believe in the doctrine of eternal security?"

"What's your doctrine of baptism?"

"What do you believe about the rapture?"

And there are people who are "tongues conscious,"

"Did you get tongues yet?"

And there are those who are "experience conscious,"

"When he put out his hand I was slain in the spirit."

And there are those who are "church conscious."

"What church do you go to, Brother?... What?... That's the wrong church ... join my church."

And there are those who are "Christian personality conscious."

"Brother So-and-So is really heavy ... Sister So-and-So, oh, I just can't stop listening to her words, they're marvelous!"

Then there are those who make you self-conscious... before you know it you're taking your spiritual pulse.

"My spiritual blood pressure dropped five points!
...I don't know what's going to become of me!"

But suppose you suddenly find yourself among people who leave your heart with one impression --- God. You don't remember what they look like, you can't quite put together what they said, you don't know exactly what they did, but somehow, since these people came along, God drew near to you. You wake up in the morning thinking about God, go to bed at night thinking about God. Throughout the day ... it's as if God is haunting you. The one mark ... the first mark of that which is done in the spirit and power of Elijah ... is that people become not conscious of you, but of God.

Notice how Elijah begins his ministry:

***"As the Lord God of Israel liveth before whom I stand...."
I Kings 17:1***

The only thing that mattered to Elijah was God.... Those two olive trees standing before God ... The two candlesticks standing before God. When people are ministering in the spirit and power of Elijah --- everywhere they go, God is. When they speak... you hear God. You look at them, and your eyes see beyond them to God.

The second thing about John the Baptist is that he called for and got repentance. People broke ... they turned ... they forsook their old ways ... they went down into the waters of baptism. Religious teachers in Israel at that time were a dime a dozen. They imparted much information. They could fill your head with all the hair-splitting "facts" you needed to know to be Kosher ... but you never changed. But when people got near John

the Baptist they either ran away from him, or repented. This will be the effect of the Elijah ministry which is beginning to emerge on the earth at this hour. People will be moved to repent.

Of course, there are those who are skilled at shouting, "Repent, repent!" They turn down the lights and put on the spooky music. You may end up with jangled nerves, but no genuine repentance. Those who are unstable become a bit more unstable ... but no repentance.

When these servants of God begin to minister, people truly repent. Everywhere "Elijahs" go, for reasons that only God knows, people start to weep. They wake up in the middle of the night and get things right. Those who are unstable find their stability in repenting, making that root change in their lives that needs to be made. When we're around these "Elijahs" we begin to admit to our own hearts how much of our faith has been shallow ... how we have, in our inmost thought, done little changing. We're still what we always were.

But now we begin to realize, as we encounter these "Elijahs," that our attitudes, our secret, bitter, cynical attitudes, are still there and we haven't made any changes in the critical areas of life --- in the area of the relationship between man and woman, the way we handle our money, the way we spend our time, the way we forgive or refuse to forgive, the way we cling to grudges. All these things have remained unchanged. In the presence of these Elijah people, repentance begins to spring up like a river in the desert, and instead of trying to pull the speck out of everybody else's eye, we concentrate on the log in our own eye.

The third and final mark of John the Baptist which set him apart from all the rest was that he made a people ready for the Messiah. When John the Baptist said,

"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,"
John 1:29

half of his own disciples left him and went to Jesus ... and John rejoiced. It's quite possible that every one of Jesus' twelve disciples had been prepared for him by John. We know for sure that Peter, James, Andrew, John and Philip were first disciples of John before they ever met Jesus.

In those days there were many religious teachers and preachers who were attaching people to themselves and binding disciples to themselves. John the Baptist, on the other hand, was preparing people to follow the Lamb. So when the Lamb came on the scene, John gladly let go of them, and off they went with Jesus.

And they came to John the Baptist and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you beyond the Jordan to whom you bore witness, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him." And John answered, "No one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness that I said I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full ... He must increase, but I must decrease." John 3:26-30

We have arrived at the hour when the spirit of Elijah is going to sweep through town like the Pied Piper. People are going to have to make up their minds whether they will drop their religious prejudices, their favorite doctrines, their Bible prophecy hobbies, their love affair with churchianity and settle for a simple, clear commitment to Jesus. The spirit of Elijah says, "Behold the Lamb of God!" and you either let go of the trappings, and commit to Jesus only, or walk away from the Light of the World.

The true test of any ministry is: Does it attach people to itself? ... fill its own kingdom? Or, does it prepare men and women to follow Jesus wherever he leads?

The Lord is not interested in keeping yours and my particular congregation in tact forevermore. It's possible that within two years we will all be scattered to the four winds, ministering where God puts us. The important thing is that we allow him to make us a people prepared, and to use us to prepare others for the Messiah. We need to understand clearly in our hearts that this is the ministry to which we have been called: to minister in such a way that people become God-conscious ... that they truly repent. And that they are made ready to meet the Messiah, brought into a living relationship with the Spirit of Jesus now.

If there are those who say, "That's too much to expect ... it's impossible for me to minister like that!", the answer is that you will indeed minister in this way with power and with fruit beyond anything that you would dare to imagine, if you are willing to practice what you preach ... if all of us are willing to practice what we preach in these three areas ...

First, if we're going to minister in the spirit and power of Elijah so that people become God-conscious, we have to live God-conscious lives ourselves, by the Spirit's power.

How are we going to make anybody else conscious of God, if we're not living in his presence ourselves? The basic ingredient of our ministries is

that we allow the Spirit who reveals the Lord, who cries, "Abba, Father," in our hearts in prayer, to make us conscious of the Father all the time ... so that we are constantly thinking God --- consciously or unconsciously. We wake up in the morning with God and we go to bed at night with God. We thank him, we praise him, we worship him, we listen to him, we glorify him, we serve him consistently.

We know not how to pray as we ought but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.
Romans 8:26

If there are those reading this who say, "That will make me a fanatic," the answer is, it won't. **Being aware of the true and living God is the only thing that will bring you into sanity ... the only thing.**

The Spirit of God has been poured out and is now being poured out on us so that we might live God-conscious lives in the place where we are at this moment ... so that just the way Elijah stood before the Lord, we stand before the Lord. And just as those two olive trees and those two lamp stands stand before the Lord we do the same. We live to God ... only to him. None of us lives to himself and none of us dies to himself.

If we live, we live to the Lord and if we die, we die to the Lord, so that whether we live or whether we die we are the Lord's.
Romans 14:8

... and only if we are living in the consciousness of the Lord are we able to make anybody else conscious of God.

Secondly, we will minister in the spirit and power of Elijah now, by bringing people to true repentance, if we live in a state of continuous repentance ourselves.

John the Baptist wore camel's hair. The two witnesses in Revelation walked around for three-and-a half years clothed in sackcloth. For what reason? ... to stay penitent. They were constantly repenting themselves ... that's why they could bring about repentance.

You and I need to take camel's hair and sackcloth and put it over our hearts. You say, "What do I have to repent of?" The answer is that **there isn't a minute of the day we don't have to repent of self ... self.** The minute we begin to fly off on a tangent of self, out of God's merciful will, the Spirit nudges us, and if we'll listen, we'll repent joyfully.

"Thank you God for saving me from wasted days and wasted hours. Thank you for bringing me back to my senses before you again."

To live in constant repentance is not morbid. On the contrary, we become more tender toward God ... more receptive to his influences ... more trusting of his goodness as we repent.. What does it mean to deny yourself, take up your cross daily, and follow Jesus, but to repent of self, every day --- all the time to repent of self? God help us to let repentance become our joy, the doorway to liberty ... for only as we live in repentance will others repent as a result of our ministry.

Finally, we will minister in the spirit and power of Elijah, making people ready for the Messiah, if we live in a relationship with the Messiah ourselves, in Spirit and in truth.

When the Spirit of truth is come, he will guide you into all truth.
John 16:13

"He will take what is mine and show it to you." It's possible now, by the power of the Holy Spirit to see Jesus, to know Jesus, to love Jesus, to walk with Jesus, to be aware of him all the time ... if we will. That's why the Spirit has been given to us. We don't just sit around waiting for the Messiah to come. We live in him now! We are conscious of him now. We walk with him, talk with him, rejoice in him, obey him.

"Lo, I am with you all the day ... I will not leave you desolate. I will come to you ..." John 14:18

Don't settle for anything less than a conscious, burning, everyday, living relationship with Jesus. And if you don't have it today, reach out for it ... call on God for it. Wait in your Jerusalem until the fountain of the Spirit begins to flow in your heart, and you know Jesus' presence again. We will never make anybody else be conscious of the Messiah unless we're living in Spirit and truth in union with him now.

He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.
Luke 1:17

The same God who raised up such a man is now raising up such a people.

May we be found among those people today.

YOUR MINISTRY

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go." (This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God.) And after this he said to him, "Follow me." Peter turned and saw following them the disciple whom Jesus loved ... When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" Jesus said to him, "If it is My will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!"
John 21:15-22

Peter understood quite well that Jesus was revealing to him the kind of death that was awaiting him ... he was going to be crucified. "O.K., so I'm going to be crucified. What about John? Is he going to be crucified too?" (We want everybody's ministry to fit into ours. And if their ministry isn't like ours, there must be something wrong with it.) Jesus says to Peter,

"If I want him to remain alive until I come back, what business is that of yours? You follow me."

Each of us is called into a ministry that is distinct from everybody else's. We are not called to follow a group, nor are we called to fit into a standard pattern ... we are called to follow the person of Jesus Christ. And as we begin to truly follow him, each of us comes into a relationship with him which is different from everyone else's. The danger is that instead of concentrating on Jesus and keeping our mind on the ministry to which he has called us, we look around and compare.

"What about this man, Lord? What about this woman over here?" Instead of trusting Jesus to keep them from falling, and to show them what they need to know, and concentrating on the ministry to which we've been called, we fall into confusion.

For instance, there is the "full-time, part-time" confusion ... the idea that there are some saints of God who are full-time and there are others who are only ministers in their spare time. It is believed by many that the spare time saints really don't count for much. It's the full-time ministers who set the pattern, who affect the destiny of the Church, who are behind all the outreaches in evangelism. Oh, the part-time saints say their prayers every day, go to Bible studies and services, and when they have a chance they go out and try to minister to people too ... but most of their time is spent making a living ... and by the time they get home from work, they're too tired to do much.

This is a deadly confusion. Every single one of us who has been called to follow Jesus has been called to follow him full-time.

If any one would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, daily, and follow me. Mark 8:34

It doesn't make any difference whether you have an eight-hour-a-day job or a "pastoral call," as long as you're doing what you're guided by God to do. It's possible that God may direct you to quit your job. And he might also direct brothers and sisters to gather around you and support you financially so that you can take care of your family and go out and do certain special things that you believe God is calling you to do. But you are no more full-time under those circumstances than you were before. Nor are you any more a full-time servant of the Lord than some brother or sister who assembles cars, or drives a bus, or practices law.

On the other hand, the Lord may guide me to give up what I'm doing as a pastor and take an eight-hour-a-day job. That doesn't mean that I'm any less full-time than I am now. Full-time, part-time, has nothing to do with where you get your pay check ... it has to do with where your heart is.

Then there's the "much fruit, little fruit" confusion. We all know that if we are called to follow the Lord we are called to bear much fruit.

By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. John 15:8

Over here is Brother Slick the Soul Winner ... "Three souls a day" is his motto. He doesn't go to bed at night unless he wins three souls to the Lord.

Over here is Convalescent Home Connie. All she ever does is spend her time with convalescent home residents, who are rather unimportant ... they're crippled, their minds are gone. What kind of fruit is that? Slick bears much fruit, Connie little fruit ... in our eyes. But in God's eyes it

may well be that Connie is bearing fruit that you and I wouldn't even begin to dream of and is far out-stripping the superficial results of Brother Slick's ministry.

Then there's the "well-known, unknown" confusion ... certain brothers and sisters around town, are well known ... their names are often on the lips of saints and they're sought for advice and they draw crowds wherever they speak. Whereas there are some brothers and sisters ... "Brother Who? I've never heard of him ... I'm sure he's very, sincere ... What, you want me to take down his name, address and telephone number? You think it would do me good to talk to him? Come now, I already have an appointment with Brother Big Time after his meeting down at Convention Hall on Tuesday night."

When are we going to get it through our heads that the reality side of our ministries has nothing to do with what is well known in the eyes of men? The reality side of our ministries is unknown to all but God. The things that men see of our ministries are about as significant as the smoke that pours out of the stacks at the local power station. It looks very ominous and impressive for a few moments and then it melts into the air and does nothing but pollute. "As unknown yet well-known," says Paul The only one before whose eyes we are well-known is God.

Then there's the "much-risk, little risk," confusion. Hudson Taylor went to China without a dime. C.T. Studd plunged into Africa with no support ... much risk. But is the risk taken by Hudson Taylor or C.T. Studd any greater than that of some unknown woman in London with ten children who works hard every day; and when there's an epidemic she's out there taking care of the sick? When they're having a problem at the church she has the guts to get up and say what needs to be said. We are all called to take risks. If we're going to follow Jesus we're going to risk it all. But the risk does not hinge on the heroics and dramatics we act out before the eyes of men, or how many books are written about our exploits. Risk begins in the heart. A lot of us husbands still haven't learned that our wives take more risks than we'll ever know. My wife will weep more easily than I, and might be more afraid of mosquitoes and fleas than I, but every time there's a crisis she demonstrates a courage that puts me to shame. Risk begins in the heart.

After this he said to him, "Follow me." Peter turned and saw following them the disciple whom Jesus loved. When Peter saw him, he said, "Lord, what about this man?" And Jesus said, "If it is my will that he remains until I come back, what's that to you? You follow me."

The call of the Lord to all of us is, "Fix your eye on me and get down to the business to which I've called you. Get your eye off your brothers and sisters. Stop being so critical. Let your ministry begin to blend instead of clash. Make sure your ministry edifies the Body --- that it does not divide and tear."

Some things to consider now about our ministries:

1. Your ministry has already begun. A lot of us think, "Won't it be wonderful when my ministry starts!" ... "I can't wait till I get through Bible college!" ... Or, "First I must get to another location ..." It's like the man who is standing on the corner with a pile of tracts. He's on his way downtown waiting for the bus. The bus is delayed and a young chap comes up to him and asks for a tract. The man gives him a tract. The young man reads it and starts to ask questions.

"What 's this all about?"

But our Christian friend, instead of concentrating on this man and his need, keeps looking up the street to see if the bus is coming. He thinks that his ministry won't start until he gets downtown. He might go downtown every day for a year and never have the opportunity he just missed on that street corner.

2. Your ministry is where you are ... not someplace else. "How wonderful it will be when I get to China!" "When I bring my spiritual gifts to Africa." But your ministry has already been given to you ... do something with it where you are! If you're not faithful in serving the Lord in the place where you have now been put, what gives you the idea that you're going to be effective anywhere else?

3. Your ministry is unique ... different from everybody else's. It's true that we are called to blend in with each other, to pray for one another, to help one another, and to function in harmony. But this does not come by trying to make people copy us or set up a model for every one to imitate. There's only one pattern that we follow, and that is the pattern of the mind of Christ, who emptied himself of his glory and became a servant. We begin to serve. And as we serve, some of us are going to be fingers and some are going to be eyes and some are going to be ears and some are going to be noses and mouths in the Body of Christ. Each of us will serve in a unique way ... according to the gifts God imparts to us in his Spirit.

4. Your ministry rides on prayer. We look at our Lord's ministry ... he heals the sick, raises the dead, feeds the hungry. Marvelous! What we don't look at are the hours, the nights, the days he spends praying, filling himself with God the Father's life, interceding for his disciples ...

"Simon, Simon, Satan has desired to have (the lot of) you that he might sift you as wheat, but I prayed for you (Peter) that your faith fail not and when you are converted, strengthen your brothers."
Luke 22:31,32

Your ministry will be what your prayer life is. If you have a vital, effective, living relationship with God in your prayers, your ministry will thrive. But if your prayer life is slovenly, haphazard, unthinking, your visible ministry is a sham.

5. Your ministry is going through continuous change ... it never stops changing. It's not a matter, as so many of us want to make it, of developing a pattern and going through our pattern the rest of our lives. God keeps opening our eyes to new things. The situation around us makes new demands, fresh needs come to us which cannot be dealt with the way we responded five years ago. If we're not willing to change, we dry up.

6. Your ministry is bearing fruit. There is no such thing as being faithful to Jesus ... abiding in him and letting him abide in you in the place where he's put you ... and not bearing fruit ... impossible! The fact that you're bearing fruit is not established by how many people pat you on the back, how many people say, "Thank you," how many results you see, how many people are, "slain in the Spirit" when you snap your fingers. The proof that you are bearing fruit is simply the word of God. He promises that if you abide in him and his words abide in you, you're going to bear fruit. Hang on to that. **In spite of all your limitations and in spite of all the hang-ups you may still have, you are bearing fruit.**

7. Your ministry is based on the fact that your name is written in heaven.

*Rejoice, not that spirits are subject to you,
but that your names are written in heaven. Luke 10:20*

The minute we begin to see things happening in our ministries, we are tempted to become intoxicated by results ... caught up in seeing things change. Our eyes are now taken away from the Lord, and soon we're busy manipulating people. Soon things are changing, not as a result of the workings of the Holy Spirit, but as a result of our own soulish energy.

And the "results" that follow may look good on the surface, but they bring death in the end.

Results are guaranteed by the Lord Jesus himself ... there will be fruit. Miracles will follow and confirm your words, but your joy is that your name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life. That God is your Father, you are his child.

There may be people who say, "All of this goes by me because I still don't have a ministry ... I've never been called." If you are a follower of Jesus, you've been called!

It may well be that the Spirit of God, in the name of Jesus, is now awakening a Mary Magdalene or an apostle Peter through this booklet. We get the idea that first you get saved, then you get trained, then you minister. But look what happened with the apostle Peter. He was called into the ministry before he ever knew what salvation was.

"Follow me, and I will make you a fisher of men," (Mark 1:17)

said the Master. The only thing that Peter knew was that Jesus had something that Peter wanted. He didn't know what it was to be saved.

"Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Luke 5:8

And Jesus didn't say, "O.K., now repeat the sinner's prayer." Jesus said,

"Fear not. Henceforth you will be catching men," Luke 5:10

And as Peter followed, he received salvation and learned all he needed to know.

This same Jesus calls you to a ministry which begins not at some future time ... but today.

Answer that call and he will direct you step by step in the way he wants you to go.