

# Instead of Judging Paula White Cain, I'll Pray for Her

If anyone had told me 20 years ago that Donald Trump would one day be president of the United States, I would have laughed and said: "That's as crazy as saying Paula White will be working for him in the White House."

Welcome to the bizarre world of 2019. Donald Trump, the billionaire businessman and reality TV star, sits in the Oval Office in the same year that rapper Kanye West made a gospel album. And last week Trump tapped Paula White Cain—a Pentecostal pastor now married to a former rock star—to serve as a religious adviser.

Some people will hate me for saying this, but I'll say it anyway. I'm praying for Paula.

Just as Trump's 2016 victory sent the American political establishment into total freak-out mode, the selection of Paula as a senior counselor on religious issues has prompted an outcry among political and media elites. It also raised eyebrows among Trump's most loyal Christian supporters, who view Paula with disdain because of her gender, her Pentecostal roots and her prosperity gospel message.

The mainstream media went after Paula after they learned of her association with Trump during his presidential campaign. The criticism got louder when she was one of six religious leaders who prayed during Trump's inauguration ceremony in January 2017. White was the first woman to ever lead an inaugural prayer.

She has been dismissed as a charlatan, partly because her ministry was investigated by U.S. Senator Charles Grassley in 2007 (no charges were ever filed) and because her flamboyant pulpit style includes some over-the-top fundraising gimmicks.

But I've watched Paula's career for 25 years, and I know she's a much more complex woman than her critics realize. Say what you will about her cringe-worthy appeals for "first fruits offerings" (tactics I've condemned in this column in the past), Paula is a sister in Christ who at least deserves our prayers as she tries to build spiritual bridges during the most divisive season in recent American history.

In the 1990s, Paula and her second husband, Randy, led Without Walls International, a booming charismatic megachurch in Tampa, Florida. Their roots were in the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee), a Pentecostal denomination that taught them to preach passionately and to reach the homeless, immigrants and the disenfranchised. Without Walls grew to more than 25,000 members in its heyday—and Paula became a celebrity.

I remember listening to one of her sermons in 2002. She told the audience in a rhythmic cadence: "I know I look like Gloria Copeland, but I preach like Jackie McCullough." (Copeland is white; McCullough is a black female preacher.) Paula's style is a mix of you-can-do-it motivational speaking and old-fashioned camp meeting fervor. Her audiences shout back at her with hallelujahs when she tells how she grew up in a trailer park but eventually bought a mansion.

Her folksy "Can I get an amen?" style endeared her to black audiences—and Without Walls became a fully integrated church. After Paula and Randy divorced in 2007, she became the pastor of New Destiny Christian Center, a predominantly African-American congregation in the Orlando area.

Paula began a friendship with Trump while she and Randy were pastoring the Tampa church. Trump had listened to one of her TV broadcasts and invited her to be on the set of *The Apprentice*. She got an apartment in Trump's Park Avenue building, and he sometimes attended her Bible studies there.

Fast-forward to 2019. Paula, now 53, restarted her life after her divorce from Randy. She married Jonathan Cain, who was a keyboardist for the rock group Journey. Since she began attending Oval Office prayer meetings and summits, Paula is often the only woman in a crowd of men wearing dark suits.

It is beyond ironic that many of the conservative preachers in these meetings don't believe women can be pastors. Yet the president they support calls Paula his pastor.

Paula's critics will most likely go after her with a vengeance now. They will ask why a female pastor would support a president who has been accused of being a womanizer. They will demand to know how she can tolerate some of Trump's statements that sound racist.

Whether or not you like her preaching or her politics, I don't believe for a minute that you can pin a racist label on Paula. *Ebony* magazine pointed out in 2007 that Paula was the most popular female preacher on the Black Entertainment Network. Since she was called to preach at age 18, she has spent most her time building bridges of racial reconciliation.

Yet while a majority of African-Americans support Democrats in elections, Paula has been a staunch defender of President Trump. During an interview on televangelist Jim Bakker's program in 2017, she said if God had not intervened in the 2016 election, religious liberties would have eroded to such an extent that people would have to pray in underground churches within five years.

"God says that He raises up and places all people in positions of authority," Paula said. "It is God who raises up a king. It is God who sets one down."

I don't know how long Paula will last in a White House known for its high turnover rate. But instead of condemning her for her flaws, I will pray that God uses her in the halls of power. In this crazy season of spiritual surprises, this

flawed woman preacher—who regularly prays for miracles—could possibly help our flawed president make wiser decisions, tone down his angry rhetoric and unite our divided nation. {eoa}

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## Is Kanye West's Conversion to Christ for Real?

Kanye West is one of the top-selling musical artists of all time, but his earliest music was so raunchy that *Billboard* wrote an article in 2016 listing his most profanity-laced lyrics. We could not print those words here.

Kanye was the last guy anybody expected to give his life to Jesus.

But things started changing a few years ago. In 2014, during one of his concerts, he referred to himself as a Christian. That same year, his flamboyant wife, Kim Kardashian, made the announcement more official. “He has had an amazing evolution of being born again and being saved by Christ,” she said.

Many Christians rolled their eyes. Kanye West? No way. But with the Oct. 25 release of his new album, *Jesus Is King*, the unpredictable hip-hop artist made it clear that he's rapping for the Lord now.

Earlier this week on James Corden's *Late Late Show*, Kanye seemed to glow as he talked about his new faith. “God has always had a plan for me, and He always wanted to use me,”

said Kanye, who is 42. "But I think He wanted me to suffer more and wanted people to see my suffering and see my pain ... So now when I talk about how Jesus saved me, more people can relate to that experience."

*Jesus Is King* is Kanye's ninth studio LP and his first foray into gospel rap. It hit No. 1 on the United States iTunes chart and is expected to hit the top of the Billboard 200 this week. It's getting mixed reviews, probably because secular critics don't know what to do with a converted rap star; meanwhile, many Christians aren't sure whether the singer's faith is genuine or just a publicity stunt designed to rake in more millions.

Last month when Kanye did a gospel concert at New Birth Missionary Baptist Church near Atlanta, a huge crowd clapped and swayed to his anthems and cheered when they realized the rapper is a brother in Christ. But when the video of that concert was posted on YouTube, some believers weren't convinced.

One person posted: "I will not trust Kanye West until he proves over time that his claimed faith is real." Another viewer wrote: "This isn't from God. You can't mix what is unholy with what is holy." And another skeptic posted: "No wonder Lucifer was the minister of music! Don't be deceived!"

Kanye apparently expected that negative reaction from some Christians when he wrote the songs on *Jesus Is King*. In the track "Hands On," he raps: "Said I'm finna do a gospel album / 'What have you been hearing from the Christians?' / They'll be the first ones to judge me / Make it feel like nobody love me."

The new album is unquestionably a Kanye West creation. It's an eclectic mix of gospel choirs, war drums, church organs, 1990s pop and a mishmash of jarring sounds all thrown in together with Kanye's uniquely inspired rap poems. There's even an ode

to Chick-fil-A, which prompted Burger King to tweet that their restaurants are open on Sundays.

In the track “Closed on Sunday,” Kanye declares: “I bow down to the King upon the throne / My life is His, I’m no longer my own / I pray to God that He’ll strengthen my hand / They will think twice steppin’ onto my land.”

How should Christians respond to Kanye’s dramatic change? I’ll make three obvious suggestions:

**Don’t judge him.** Early Christians didn’t know what to do with a dangerous Pharisee named Saul who had been known to kill believers. But it turned out that Saul became the apostle Paul—because the grace of God is big enough to transform evil to good.

**Pray that he gets disciplined.** All believers need the right people in their lives to guide them to spiritual maturity. But this is never easy for someone with as much fame and wealth as Kanye—who is currently worth between \$240 million and \$1 billion. And let’s pray that the people who help shape his Christian formation aren’t compromised by the lure of that money.

**Pray that God uses Kanye’s platform to spread the gospel.** In 2005 and then in 2015, Kanye was named one of the top 100 Most Influential People in the world by *Time* magazine. That was before he began this recent spiritual journey. This week millions of people who don’t identify as Christians are listening to their first gospel album. They are hearing thunderous praise from an anointed 100-voice choir. And they are hearing their favorite rap artist quoting John 8:36: “Whom the son sets free is free indeed.”

If Kanye stays faithful to God and humbly acknowledges that God has given him this notoriety to reach people for Christ, we could see a huge impact on our culture.

I can't predict which way this will go. In the darkest moments before his conversion, the rapper was known for erratic behavior, and he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. He went on crazy rants, crashed the stage at the 2009 MTV Awards and was hospitalized for a mental breakdown.

Yet today he says he likes to spend his evenings at home, playing with his four kids, talking to his wife and reading his Bible before bed.

When James Corden interviewed Kanye this week, he asked the rapper how he will respond when skeptics say his faith can't be real. Kanye answered: "People who don't believe are the walking dead. They are asleep, and this is the awakening." Let's pray that Kanye will stay humble, listen to godly counsel, strengthen his marriage, find mental and emotional healing, and lead thousands to his newfound faith. {eoa}

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## **Why John MacArthur Should Apologize to Women Preachers**

Fundamentalist preacher John MacArthur, known for his "Grace to You" radio broadcast, didn't show any grace last weekend when he was asked what he thought about popular Bible teacher Beth Moore. During a pastor's conference in Sun Valley, California, held Oct. 16-18, MacArthur said he thought Moore should "go home" when he was asked on a panel what he thought of her.

To make his words even less gracious, the audience laughed and cheered.

“I think the church is caving in to women preachers,” said MacArthur, a Reformed Baptist who has preached for 50 years that women have no biblical right to stand behind a pulpit or serve in church leadership.

I respect some of MacArthur’s theological contributions. He has written some excellent books. But his dismissive attitude toward women who are called to ministry is rude, crude and incredibly unhelpful in a day when we need every available minister—male or female—on the front lines.

MacArthur sincerely believes he’s upholding Scripture when he demands an all-male clergy. Like so many fundamentalists before him, he builds his narrow doctrinal interpretation on one verse in 1 Timothy while ignoring women leaders in the Bible including Deborah, Miriam, Huldah, Priscilla, Nympha, Chloe, Euodia, Syntyche and others who served with the apostle Paul.

Would MacArthur tell the prophet Deborah to “go home” rather than organize an army to defend ancient Israel? Would he tell Priscilla to “go home” rather than travel and teach in New Testament churches?

I wonder if MacArthur and other fundamentalists realize what they are saying when they demand that the Beth Moores of our day sit down and be quiet. Do they seriously want the spiritual contributions of women to go away?

Where would we be if the powerful women God used in past generations never had a place in ministry? To think our sisters have no role to play in the spreading of the gospel reveals the highest level of male arrogance.

Thankfully, women throughout the centuries who had the fire of God burning in their hearts did not listen to the religious

naysayers who told them they should go home and be quiet.

What would have happened if the great missionary Amy Carmichael had been content to stay in her comfortable house in England because of the misguided belief that women are never to speak for God? Because Amy obeyed and preached with fervor, thousands in India found salvation through her Dohnavur Fellowship, and scores of young Indian girls were pulled out of the evil system of Hindu temple prostitution.

What if Jarena Lee, a poor black woman living in the early 1800s in America, had ignored the voice of the Holy Spirit that told her, "Preach the gospel! I will put My words in your mouth." A Methodist who had a powerful experience of personal sanctification, she traveled thousands of miles on foot preaching and winning converts.

What would have happened if Southern Baptist missionary Bertha Smith had adhered to her own denomination's policies about women in ministry? Because this brave pioneer knew she couldn't keep silent about her faith, she took her message to China and sparked a revival that is still felt there 70 years later.

What if healing evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson had embraced the lie that says women cannot speak in church? She never would have blazed a trail across the United States with her Pentecostal message, and she would have never started the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel—a denomination that has grown to millions of members around the world.

What if the great Bible teacher Henrietta Mears of Hollywood Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles had assumed that the words of the apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 2:12 forbade her from teaching men? She would have never hosted the large discipleship conferences she sponsored in the 1940s and 1950s. And she would have never had the opportunity to mentor both Bill Bright and Billy Graham when they were young. Those men,

by their own admission, led millions to Jesus because of Mears' influence on their spiritual growth.

And what would the world be like if Salvation Army co-founder Catherine Booth, healing evangelist Kathryn Kuhlman or Bible teacher Corrie ten Boom had kept their mouths shut when the Holy Spirit called them to shout their message from the housetops?

And while we are on the subject of Beth Moore, let's remember that this remarkable woman has published more than 25 books and Bible studies and has indirectly disciplined countless women and men through her writings, broadcasts and conferences. I don't even want to imagine a world without her contributions.

What a shame that our brother John MacArthur would devalue Moore's spiritual gifts and then suggest that her ministry is illegitimate. I believe he owes Moore, and all women preachers, a swift apology. {eoa}

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## **The Miracle of Iran's Underground Church**

Last week during a trip to western Australia, I spoke in a small church comprised mostly of Iranian immigrants. The worship was in Farsi and English, and the pastor typically gives his sermons only in Farsi. My translator that evening, Mehrzad, told me he encountered Jesus for the first time just a few years ago.

Before I left Australia, I became good friends with three more young Iranian converts to Christianity. All of them left Iran to find a better life in Australia. All of them told me that Iranians back home are disillusioned with Islam and are on a desperate search for spiritual reality.

One of these men, whom I will call Bahram, began developing a strong hunger to know God after he saw the 2016 Mel Gibson film *Hacksaw Ridge*, in which a framed copy of the Lord's prayer is shown during a key scene. Bahram had never heard of the prayer. He looked it up on the internet out of curiosity.

A few days later, two random pages of the Bible ended up on his doorstep, blown by the wind. The pages included Luke 11, where the Lord's prayer appears. Bahram saw this as a sign from God, and he eventually gave his life to Christ.

"Back home in Iran, young people my age have turned away from Islam," another young convert, Mahmoud, told me.

I was not surprised to hear these testimonies. Missionary strategists have been reporting for some time that Iran is experiencing the most impressive surge of church growth on the planet. Elam Ministries, based in England, says more Iranians have become Christians since 1979 than in the previous 1,300 years. Some organizations estimate that there could be as many as 800,000 to 1 million believers in the country.

But Iran is also one of the most difficult places on earth to be a Christian because of persecution from the hard-line Islamic government. Believers are jailed and tortured. Churches are forced to meet in secrecy. Yet one ministry there has reported that so many people are being converted they can't keep enough Farsi Bibles in stock to give to new believers.

Elam Ministries says Iranian churches typically have between eight to 12 members only. To stay safely off the radar, the small churches multiply quietly. But this method of small-

group discipleship actually produces stronger Christians than a bigger church would. Elam also reports that many people make decisions for Jesus after watching Christian television broadcasts.

In May of this year, Iran's intelligence minister, Mahmoud Mahmoud Alavi, gave a speech to Muslim clerics in which he publicly decried the alarming growth of Christian faith. He announced that mass religious conversion to Christianity is "happening right before our eyes."

Iran's revival is also gaining more attention because of the new film *Lambs Among Wolves, Vol. 2*, a documentary produced by Frontier Alliance International Studios. One unidentified church leader in the movie asks: "What if I told you the mosques are empty inside Iran? What if I told you no one follows Islam inside of Iran? Would you believe me? This is exactly what is happening inside of Iran."

It's no secret in the Muslim world that Iranians are rejecting the core values of the Ayatollah Khomeini's Iranian Revolution, which he launched in 1979. An article published in June 2019 by Al-Jazeera, the Middle Eastern news service, admits that a majority of Iranians today believe Khomeini's period of rule was a failure that took away their rights.

Many young Iranians want nothing to do with Islam now, even though they are forced to pretend that they support it.

An unidentified Iranian pastor in the *Sheep Among Wolves* video said the harsh ayatollahs indirectly helped the cause of the gospel. "The ayatollahs brought the true face of Islam to light and people discovered it was a lie," the pastor said. "After 40 years under Islamic law—a utopia according to them—they've had the worst devastation in the 5,000-year history of Iran."

The Al-Jazeera report states that only between 10 to 15% of Iran's more than 80 million people actually are loyal to the

idea of an Islamic Republic. Mosques are emptying. Most people reject the idea of an all-powerful Muslim cleric running their country. At some point, as hard-liners lose power, democracy and an unexpected wave of religious freedom will become a reality in Iran.

And that's why Iran's believers need our prayers more than ever. Pray for the believers who are languishing in jails. Pray for the leaders of house churches as they seek to reach others for Christ secretly. And pray that what is happening in Iran will spread throughout the Middle East.

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## **You Must See in the Invisible Realm**

These days, I'm trying to raise funds for some overseas mission projects. I need several thousand dollars to finish a women's shelter in Guatemala, about the same amount for a similar effort in Peru and even more for projects in Africa and Asia. My faith rises when I pray, but when I look at my ministry bank account, my heart sinks. The numbers aren't good. The reality of my lack can be discouraging. That's because I'm negatively affected by what I see. Bank ledgers don't lie.

We all deal with this struggle. God's promises look bright, but reality is like ice water poured on our dreams. We can be traumatized by what we see or hear—whether we are dealing with a financial challenge, a health crisis, a wayward child or a struggling church.

The Lord is teaching me this lesson right now, because my tendency is to base my reactions totally on what I see and hear. I've had many freak-out moments recently because I see my situation and doubt God's promise. So the Lord took me to a story from the prophet Elisha's life to teach me that perception isn't reality.

When the king of Aram plotted to capture Elisha, the prophet's servant went out early in the morning to assess the situation. He was terrified when he saw the king's chariots circling the city. His faith shrank when he heard the deafening sound of marching.

But Elisha wasn't even remotely worried. He told his servant: "Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than with them" (2 Kings 6:16). Then the prophet prayed that his servant's eyes would be opened to see behind the curtain of natural senses. The Lord opened the servant's eyes, and verse 17b says, "he saw that the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire surrounding Elisha."

Elisha had no fear of the king's army because he saw what was happening in the invisible realm. He knew heaven's reality was more real than earthly reality. Heaven's armies were stronger. God was preparing a surprise victory.

What Elisha's disciple learned that day is a lesson for us all. We live in a time when the enemy's hordes are all around us—and in our media-saturated culture, they make a lot of noise. The devil, the master of fake news, traumatizes us with scary sights and sounds. We must respond in three ways:

**Develop your spiritual senses.** Just as there are five senses in the natural, there are spiritual senses. We can see visions, we can hear God's voice, we can feel the Holy Spirit's quaking, we can smell the fragrance of Christ and we can "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps. 34:8a). But the writer of Hebrews tells us that our senses must be trained

(Heb. 5:14) if we want to walk in spiritual maturity.

Our God is invisible. His throne, His angels and His glory are hidden from our natural eyes. Yet every spiritual hero in the Bible who left us an example of faith saw beyond what eyes can see. Ask God to open your eyes to the heavenly realm.

**Don't focus on the flesh or rely on your mind.** Paul said the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile toward God, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God (see Rom. 8:7-8). This is one reason he prayed in the Holy Spirit often. He told the Corinthians: "I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also" (1 Cor. 14:15, ESV). We don't check our brains at the door when we become Christians. God can use our minds. But you will never grasp spiritual reality if you only live in the natural realm. You must be filled with the Spirit and submit your thoughts to the Spirit. Otherwise, you will rely on human reasoning and human strength instead of God's invisible power.

**Discover the reality of Christ's victory.** When David was at war with the Philistines, he trusted God to show him how to fight. In one battle, the Lord told David not to strike until he heard the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees (2 Sam. 5:24-25). That makes no sense in the natural! But David knew when he heard the sound that God's unseen angelic armies had arrived.

David wrote of these unseen armies in Psalm 68. He said: "The chariots of God are twice ten thousand, even thousands of thousands" (v. 17a, MEV). You may feel God has left you to fight defenseless. Think again! If you belong to Christ, He has not left you alone in this battle. Open your eyes and ears. Listen for the sound of His angelic warriors as they fight for you.

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## **Don't Be Afraid to Let Holy Spirit Move**

Last weekend, I preached at a church that meets in a big lecture hall on a university campus in Perth, Australia. Most of the congregation at Zion Praise Harvest Church consists of students from Singapore, China and Malaysia. Some of them met Jesus for the first time while in college.

The whole experience at Zion was refreshing for me, mainly because most of the people in the service were young enough to be my children. But I was also blessed because the pastors, Patrick and Joyce Chen, wanted the Holy Spirit to move in the service. In fact, Patrick told me I was welcome to take a longer time to invite people to the front of the auditorium for prayer after my sermon.

And that is exactly what happened. Dozens of young people came

to the stage, asking to be filled with the Holy Spirit. God showed up and touched them all in a deep way. One young man buried his head in my chest and sobbed because God was healing his emotional hurts. Another young girl came to me after the service and shared that God had delivered her from deep shame.

If your church allows this kind of freedom for ministry, you are blessed—because many pastors today are afraid to allow the Holy Spirit to move. We've put the Spirit in a box. We have a long list of seeker-friendly rules these days, telling us that: 1) American churchgoers only want a 60-minute church experience; 2) the only “cool” way to do church is to offer three songs, a short TED Talk and video announcements on a big screen and 3) altar calls or extended prayer times will scare people away.

People need the reality of God's power. My prayer lately has been that we will stop being so worried about how the Holy Spirit will show up or show off. We should stop being so afraid of people's reactions. Here are seven practical things we can do to encourage the freedom of the Spirit in our churches:

1. **Teach about the Holy Spirit often.** The Holy Spirit was rarely mentioned in the church I grew up in, so we never expected Him to do anything. Yet He is described in the second verse of the Bible as “moving” upon the surface of the newly created world (Gen. 1:2), and He has one of the last messages in the Bible (see Rev. 22:17). He moves and He speaks throughout the Scriptures! But we must invite the Spirit to move and speak in our churches by giving Him the place He deserves.
2. **Leave room for altar ministry.** A church without altar ministry is like a hospital without a maternity ward. New life often begins at the altar—whether it is salvation, healing, prophetic ministry or the impartation of a fresh anointing. Today many churches

that offer multiple services often skimp on ministry time because they are focused on herding the 10 a.m. group out of the sanctuary to get ready for the 11:30 a.m. crowd. Multiple services are fine, but we are crowding the Spirit out of the church if we don't schedule time for people to respond to the message.

3. **Have small groups where people can use the Holy Spirit's gifts.** It's not practical for everyone to prophesy or exercise other spiritual gifts in a large congregation. But if people are plugged into small groups, there will be opportunities for believers to encourage one another in supernatural ways. And people are more comfortable stepping out in faith in front of 10 people than they are in front of 3,000.
4. **Train people in prophecy, healing and Spirit-led ministry.** Many pastors clamp down on spiritual gifts because a few fanatics with inflated egos like to pull the church into weirdness. But in our effort to protect the sheep from "charismania," let's not pull the pendulum to the other extreme by forbidding the gifts of the Spirit. The genuine power of God will flow if we teach people the difference between authentic anointing and strange fire.
5. **Offer "teaching moments" to explain the gifts of the Spirit.** I've been in churches where Brother Herschel or Sister Agnes prophesied in such a harsh, condemning tone that everyone in the church let out a collective groan. Their "words from God" had the same effect on the congregation as fingernails on a chalkboard. We cannot ignore these moments and move on. When the Corinthians mishandled speaking in tongues and prophecy in the first century, the apostle Paul used their mistakes as an opportunity to teach about how to use gifts properly. We should do the same.

6. **Expose your church to healthy ministries that flow in the anointing.** God not only gave the church pastors—He also gave evangelists, teachers, prophets and apostles (see Eph. 4:11). Yet many churches today know only pastors. We need life-giving traveling ministries because God sends them to win new converts, heal the sick, unleash prophetic power, train leaders and impart new vision in congregations. We should not be afraid to open our pulpits to the ministry gifts God has raised up to bless the church.
7. **Give time for testimonies of God's supernatural power.** Nothing raises the faith level of a congregation like someone's raw experience with God. If a man was healed this week in your church, let him shout it from the housetops. If an infertile couple got pregnant, let them tell about the goodness of God. Stories of supernatural intervention trigger a holy expectation in everyone—and God gets the glory for His miracles.

We should be willing to pray, "Holy Spirit, come." Let's fling open the doors and allow the Spirit to have His way. Instead of being afraid of what He might disrupt or whom He might offend, let's rather fear what our churches would be like without Him. {eoa}

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## **4      Reasons      Christian      Men**

# Struggle Spiritually

Last weekend, I led a three-day retreat for 125 men in Pittsburgh. The guys came from more than a dozen states as well as Canada. There were teenagers, college students, 20-somethings, hipsters, jocks, young fathers, businessmen and a few retirees. And the ethnic mix included Ugandan, Korean, Ethiopian, Russian, Hispanic and Ghanaian.

Despite our racial diversity and age differences, all the men shared pretty much the same spiritual needs. After 35-year-old youth pastor Daren Duncan preached a passionate but confrontational message about pornography on Friday night, men from every background stepped up to the church altar to ask for prayer for freedom from the shame of past sins.

It was wonderful to see some of those guys, both young and old, weep openly as they confessed their mistakes to another brother in Christ. When the event ended on Saturday afternoon, the men didn't want to leave because they had found so much support from their new friends.

What happened in Pittsburgh needs to be repeated all over this country because Christian men are in crisis. Their marriages are shaky, their families are under siege and men themselves are struggling spiritually—yet they rarely tell anyone what's going on underneath their inch-thick protective body armor. Too many Christian men are on lockdown, silently suffering but too afraid to admit they are in pain.

After leading these retreats for men for the past 10 years, I've identified four main reasons why men in our churches are hurting.

- 1. We have deep father wounds.** The very word "father" hits a raw nerve for a lot of guys. Many men suffer from what we could call a "father ache." A lot of guys have a deep void in their hearts because their dads were either absent entirely

when they were young, emotionally distant, abusive or addicted. That's a big reason they struggle to understand the unconditional love of the heavenly Father.

**2. We don't have supportive relationships.** When I was a boy, everyone was familiar with the Marlboro Man, the most recognized icon in American advertising. This rugged cowboy was always with his horse in a Western setting, and he was always smoking a cigarette. His tough-guy image carried the subliminal message that real men are always alone.

Those cigarette ads are no longer permitted in magazines today, but the idea that men should be isolated is still a common belief. In fact, young American guys in 2019 are even more isolated than men were 50 years ago because of technology, pornography and video games. We are witnessing an epidemic of loneliness in today's culture, and it's evident in churches too.

David Smith, author of the book *The Friendless American Male*, says of Christian men today: "The fragmentation of community life; corporate pressures; the breakdown of the extended and nuclear family; the drive for success and the rate of mobility have all taken a tremendous toll on the numbers of intimate friendships we acquire and sustain."

**3. We strive to find our identity in worldly success.** Many men today have something to prove. They are frustrated and insecure because they didn't get the affirmation they needed from parents, especially fathers. So they are driven and performance-oriented. Christian men who are bent in this direction base their identity on what they do, not who they are.

Performance orientation leads to all kinds of dysfunction. It drives some men to keep insane work schedules. It fuels a competitive atmosphere in the workplace. It pushes men to climb the ladder of success so they can buy the latest toys.

Driven men often develop this tendency because they couldn't please their own dads. So the church ends up being full of tormented overachievers who hurt others—especially their own families—in their pursuit of success at all costs.

**4. We prefer to medicate our emotional pain.** God created us with the capacity for emotional release. He gave us mouths so we can talk honestly about our struggles. He gave us tear ducts so we could cry when necessary. He gave us ears so we can listen to others when they are hurting. And He gave us arms and hands to be able to soothe and embrace each other when we are dealing with grief or tragedy.

Pain must be processed; it cannot be stuffed away. But what happens when we don't use those God-given outlets? When a man buries his problems, he will almost always find a way to medicate his pain. This is why so many men—including Christian guys—become addicted to alcohol, nicotine, porn, illegal drugs or prescription medicines.

Are the men in your church struggling? Are they paralyzed by shame, loneliness, secret addictions and a lack of spiritual passion? We can't build healthy churches if we don't have healthy men. But churches today are ill-equipped to meet the needs outlined here.

Let's ask the Lord to send fresh grace to heal men's hearts.  
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# Don't Freak Out When You're in Transition

Three years ago this month, my wife and I packed our belongings and made the biggest move of our lives. After living in Florida for 24 years, we pulled up our roots and relocated to Georgia. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done because I'm a sentimental guy who gets very attached to people and places. Yet I found extra grace for this transition because I knew I was following the Holy Spirit.

Counselors say relocation is one of the most stressful things in life—ranking right up there with the death of a loved one. It's a huge combination of stressors—selling a house, buying or renting a new house, hiring movers, leaving friends and stepping into the dark unknown. Not fun!

Little did I know that the stress of this transition would be made worse by the loss of my father in 2018 and the loss of my wife's mother just two weeks ago. To make things worse, my own mother is in hospice care now. Deaths or illness of family members can make us feel rootless and unsettled.

Perhaps you are about to step into a transition—or are already in the middle of one. I'm comforted by the fact that the Bible is full of people who were directed by God to move. Abraham, the father of our faith, began his spiritual odyssey when the Lord said: "Go from your country ... to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1b).

When God wanted to do something really important, like start a new nation that would serve Him, it began with a relocation. Spiritual blessings often aren't realized until someone moves! Moses had to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. David had to move to Jerusalem. And Jesus' last words to His disciples were about moving to foreign countries.

If you are in a season of transition, consider these helpful steps:

1. **Be brave.** When Joshua was preparing to relocate the people of Israel to Canaan, God said three times: “Be strong and courageous” (Josh. 1:6a, a7, 9b). Moving requires a leap of faith, and doubters always get cold feet. Has God given you a big promise about the land you are about to possess? Don’t be surprised if the devil tries to make you fearful. Take a deep breath, resist fear and forge ahead.
2. **Take one step at a time.** Moving isn’t just one decision; it’s a tangled mess of many decisions that can overwhelm you. You don’t have to handle everything at once. The Bible says you are not on your own; you don’t have to figure out your relocation plan by yourself. You have a Shepherd, and He is good. He leads you “beside still waters” and He guides you “in paths of righteousness” (Ps. 23:2-3). Trust your Shepherd’s leading. He will make your transition peaceful.
3. **Let go of the old.** When God wanted to bless Naomi, He told her to leave the forsaken land of Moab and move to Bethlehem. Her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth pledged to go with her, but her other daughter-in-law, Orpah, stayed behind. Orpah couldn’t tear herself away from her culture, even though God was doing good things for His people in Bethlehem (Ruth 1:14-16).

Sometimes when God calls us to a new place in the Spirit, we discover that we are hindered by many soulish distractions. You must love Jesus more than you love your comfort zone. It’s good to have roots in a place, but you must never let those roots become stronger than your willingness to follow God anywhere.

I have also learned that since I began putting down roots in my new town, the process of “settling” takes time. You don’t

immediately find the right church and the right relationships. Don't let feelings of unsettledness cause you to rush and make wrong choices. Be expectant. God has new things for you, but you must wait patiently for Him.

4. **Cry if you need to.** The day I left Florida in 2016, I walked through my house one last time and locked the front door. Then I sobbed in my car as I remembered playing with my young daughters in the backyard, hanging Christmas decorations on the shrubs and burying our family dog in the backyard. Then, after my father died, I cried again when I sold my parent's home and said goodbye to all those memories. It's totally normal to feel sadness when we move. The best way to process your feelings is to let the tears flow.
5. **Be open to God's detours.** One important lesson I learned in my transition is that we must never lock ourselves into "our" plan. You may sense the Lord leading you to leave where you are, but when you begin moving to your new destination, God may redirect you. The apostle Paul was heading to Rome to preach the gospel, but a shipwreck took him to Malta—where he led an unscheduled revival. Don't be so headstrong about your destination that God can't gently nudge you in a different direction.
6. **Expect miracles.** When I knew for sure God was calling my wife and I to Georgia, we asked our friends to pray with us. I shared seven specific prayer requests, and the first item on the list was: "Quick sale of our house." Guess what? Our house sold in less than 24 hours—to the first people who walked in the door! Since then, all but the last request on my list has been answered.

Moving can be a thrilling adventure when you invite God into the process. When the Holy Spirit says go, He goes with you. When He calls you to leave the old and step into the new, He

propels you to a new spiritual level. {eoa}

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## **7 Ways to Bridge the Generation Gap in the Church**

If you watched the Democratic Party's presidential debate last week, you'll know why San Antonio Mayor Julian Castro got poor marks from so many commentators and viewers. Castro seemed to be attacking former Vice President Joe Biden for his age, implying that the 76-year-old candidate is losing his memory.

"Are you forgetting already what you said just two minutes ago?" Castro said to Biden during the Sept. 12 event. The 45-year-old politician was upset that Biden didn't seem to remember what he had just said about his plans for a national health care system. (It didn't help when Biden suggested that low-income parents should "make sure you have the record player on" to encourage better education.)

Castro's comment during the debate revealed the obvious: There is a growing generation gap in American politics. Some younger politicians have even said that Biden, as well as Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren (who is 70) and New Hampshire Senator Bernie Sanders (he's 78), are too old to be president. And many of those same critics insist that Donald Trump should be replaced because he'll be 74 if he wins a second term in 2020.

This caustic us versus them mentality has also surfaced in the church today. I constantly hear older Christians complaining about how "those young people" are forcing them to change the music or the dress code on Sunday mornings. Meanwhile I hear young people griping because the worship, preaching or

attitudes at a particular church are not as hip as they require.

We have marginalized each other. We've reached a generational impasse. Is there any way we can bridge this gap? It won't be easy, but here are a few ways we could build a bridge:

1. **Deal with your prejudices.** Today we're super sensitive about confronting racism and sexism. Yet somehow we think it's OK to judge others because of age. When Jesus commanded us to "love one another" (John 13:34b), He didn't mean you should love only the people who are in your age demographic. He wants Facebook users and Instagram users to get together instead of avoiding each another.
2. **Stop writing people off.** The New Testament also calls us to "accept one another" (Rom. 15:7a, NIV)—which means to be tolerant and patient toward those who aren't like us. That means older Christians shouldn't be offended by tattoos, piercings, technology or the clothing styles of Gen Xers. It also means younger people should try to learn something from an older person's "old-fashioned" attitudes instead of rolling their eyes at them.
3. **Learn to show honor.** I buried my brain-damaged father last year, and now my 91-year-old mother has dementia. I spend a lot of my time talking to nursing home residents these days, and they have taught me a lot about compassion. Their bodies and minds are worn out, but they are precious to God. We should honor the old, knowing that one day we will be in their condition.
4. **Don't get stuck in your "era."** I don't understand older people who insist on "my way or the highway" when it comes to church styles. God is always moving forward. He is not stuck in the past, so why should I be? Even though I'm 61, I don't mind if my pastor is half my age or if the music reflects today's styles. I want my

church to reach younger people, not just my generation. Be flexible and willing to change.

5. **Encourage mentoring.** I spend most of my time discipling younger guys. Even though I'm old enough to be their dad, they enjoy spending time with me. They learn from my experiences, and I encourage them to achieve far more than I ever did. I hear so many older Christians bashing Millennials and Gen X Christians for being spoiled, but that has not been my experience at all. Today's young Christians are passionate for God and totally teachable.
6. **Be open to "reverse mentoring."** Even though I invest a lot of my time in discipling younger Christians, that doesn't mean I don't learn from them. My spiritual sons and daughters have taught me so much—they've trained me in technology, introduced me to new music and books, helped me adjust my attitudes and even challenged me in physical fitness. I'm better today because of the input I receive from younger people.
7. **Embrace God's generational mindset.** God is ageless, and He isn't locked into one generation's viewpoint. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He transcends time. He wants one generation to declare His praises to the next. He wants the mantle that rested on Elijah to be transferred to Elisha. Why is this concept so difficult for us to embrace?

When the Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost, Peter declared: "'In the last days it shall be,' says God, ... 'your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams'" (Acts 2:17, MEV). The Spirit wants to move across generational lines. He wants to speak through the young and the old. He wants to connect us, blend us and use us together as one united body of Christ. {eoa}

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# We Must See in the Invisible Realm

These days I'm trying to raise funds for some overseas mission projects. I need several thousand dollars to finish a women's shelter in Guatemala, about the same amount for a similar effort in Peru, and even more for projects in Africa and Asia.

My faith rises when I pray, but when I look at my ministry bank account, my heart sinks. The numbers aren't good. The reality of my lack can be discouraging. That's because I am negatively affected by what I see. Bank ledgers don't lie.

We all deal with this struggle. God's promises look bright, but reality comes like ice water poured on our dreams. We can be traumatized by what we see or hear—whether we are dealing with a financial challenge, a health crisis, a wayward child or a struggling church.

The Lord is teaching me this lesson right now, because my tendency is to base my reactions totally on what I see and hear. I've had many freak-out moments recently because I see my situation and doubt God's promise. So the Lord took me to a story from the life of the prophet Elisha to teach me that perception isn't reality.

When the king of Aram plotted to capture Elisha, the prophet's servant went out early in the morning to assess the situation. He was terrified when he saw the king's warriors, horses and chariots circling the city. His faith shrank when he heard the deafening sound of marching. They were about to be massacred!

But Elisha wasn't even remotely worried. He told his servant: "Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than with them"

(2 Kings 6:16). Then the prophet prayed that his servant's eyes would be opened to see behind the curtain of natural senses. The Lord opened his eyes, and verse 17b says, "the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire surrounding Elisha."

Elisha had no fear of the king's chariots because he saw what was happening in the invisible realm. He knew heaven's reality was more real than earthly reality. Heaven's armies were stronger. Heaven's horses and chariots were engulfed in the supernatural fire of glory. God was preparing a surprise victory.

What Elisha's disciple learned that day is a lesson for us all. We live in a time when the enemy's hordes are all around us—and in our media-saturated culture, they make a lot of noise. The devil, the master of fake news, traumatizes us with scary sights and sounds. We must respond in three ways:

1. **Develop your spiritual senses.** Just as there are five senses in the natural, there are spiritual senses. We can see visions (Acts 2:17), we can hear God's voice (John 16:13), we can feel the Holy Spirit's quaking (Acts 4:31), we can smell the fragrance of Christ (2 Cor. 2:15) and we can "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps. 34:8). But the writer of Hebrews tells us that our senses must be trained (Heb. 5:14) if we want to walk in spiritual maturity.

Ask God to open your eyes to the heavenly realm. Learn to "see" when you pray. We walk by faith, not by sight. Our God is invisible. His throne, His angels and His glory are hidden from our natural eyes. Yet every spiritual hero in the Bible who left us an example of faith saw beyond what eyes can see. We must do the same.

2. **Don't focus on the flesh or rely on your mind.** Paul said the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile toward God,

and those who are in the flesh cannot please God (see Rom. 8:7-8). This is one reason he prayed in the Holy Spirit often. He told the Corinthians: "I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also" (1 Cor. 14:15, ESV).

We don't check our brains at the door when we become Christians. God can use our minds. But you will never grasp spiritual reality if you only live in the natural realm. You must be filled with the Spirit and submit your thoughts to the Spirit. Otherwise, you will rely on human reasoning and human strength instead of God's invisible power.

**3. Discover the reality of Christ's victory.** When David was at war with the Philistines, he trusted God to show him how to fight. In one battle, the Lord told David not to strike until he heard the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees (see 2 Sam. 5:24-25). That makes no sense in the natural! But David knew when he heard the sound it meant God's unseen angelic armies had arrived.

David wrote of these unseen armies in Psalm 68. He said: "The chariots of God are twice ten thousand, even thousands of thousands" (v. 17a, MEV). We may think we must face our problems alone. We may feel God has left us to fight defenseless. Think again! If you belong to Christ, He is leading you to victory. The battle belongs to Him. Open your eyes and ears. Listen for the sound of His angelic warriors as they fight for you. {eoa}