

Asia's Churches Empower Women—So Should We

This past week, I've been in Singapore, a nation known as "the Antioch of Asia" because of its thriving churches. Some Western ministry leaders come to Singapore to learn the secret of their church growth. Is it cell groups? Is it their administrative savvy? Is it their openness to the Holy Spirit? All those things have helped—but many people ignore the fact that women have played a prominent role in the success of churches here.

A few days ago, I had lunch with Naomi Dowdy, who came to Singapore as a young Assemblies of God missionary in 1975. She began pastoring a small church, but in four decades, it grew to more than 5,000 members. Today, Trinity Christian Center has more than 8,000 members and is led by Dominic Yao, the man Naomi trained to be her successor.

Naomi Dowdy's success is being repeated by younger women in Singapore today. Last weekend, I spent time with Haziël Minoza, a dynamic church planter who leads the Filipino congregation of 5,000-member Cornerstone Church, which is led by Pastor Yang Tuck-Yoong. Haziël has already planted 10 Filipino congregations, and her passion is to train more leaders.

I'm so grateful that Naomi Dowdy and Haziël Minoza were given the opportunity to function in their spiritual gifts. Countless people found Jesus Christ as a result. Yet in the United States, many women still feel still resistance if they volunteer to lead anything other than a women's Bible study. Why is this? During the 20 years I've been a vocal proponent of women in ministry, I've observed seven reasons why conservative evangelicals limit women in the church:

- 1. We misunderstand Scripture.** Conservatives who bar women from leadership typically cite 1 Timothy 2:12 or 1 Corinthians 14:34 (NASB) (“women are to keep silent in the churches”), and yet they ignore verses affirming women’s spiritual gifts. Deborah, who served as senior leader of ancient Israel, is ignored, and New Testament women leaders such as Priscilla, Phoebe, Euodia, Syntyche, Junia or the daughters of Philip are dismissed. We also conveniently forget that Peter announced on the day of Pentecost: “Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17b, MEV). Scripture calls certain women to leadership rather than banning them from it.
- 2. We are bound by religious tradition.** Martin Luther was a prophetic voice to the church when he exposed religious corruption and heresy. Yet he was still so bound by his own 16th-century bias against women that he believed God created females only for the purpose of childbirth. Many conservative Christians still hold antiquated ideas about female inferiority. This explains why so many churches didn’t allow women to wear pants or makeup a few decades ago, and why women today are still expected to serve only as cooks or babysitters in some denominations.
- 3. We don’t give the Holy Spirit full control.** Paul the apostle wrote: “There is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28b). He understood the amazing equality of the Holy Spirit, who gives spiritual gifts to “each one” (1 Cor. 12:11b)—not according to gender, class or race but according to God’s choice. God chooses whom He wills; He does not qualify based on human criteria. This means we must affirm the valid gifts and callings of our sisters. If God calls an Esther to lead, we should not hide the scepter from her.

4. **We are afraid of “feminizing” the church.** Some insecure Christian men complain that there are already too many women making decisions in the church. One author even demanded that flowers be removed from church altars because they are feminine! My response: The same God who created deer antlers and buckskin also made carnations and orchids. Genesis 1:26-28 says God created male and female in His image. Only when we have men and women functioning in their full capacity in the church will we see His image fully manifested. It took both Abraham and Sarah to give birth to Israel; God wants both genders involved in His work.
5. **We associate women leaders with a liberal agenda.** In the United States, many of the women who hold political office do not reflect Christian moral values. For this reason, some people automatically associate women preachers or pastors with a radical feminist agenda. This is unfair. In America’s past, some of the greatest leaders of social change were women who held Christian beliefs—brave women like Harriet Tubman, Phoebe Palmer and Sojourner Truth—but they would have been uncomfortable with today’s liberal agenda. We need an army of women leaders who will speak as prophets on the national stage.
6. **We don’t see enough positive examples of female leadership.** In the early Pentecostal movement, it was not uncommon to see women preachers traveling across our nation planting churches and conducting evangelistic campaigns in roadside tents. Women preachers, including Aimee Semple MacPherson, Carrie Judd Montgomery and Myrtle Beall made a huge spiritual impact on their generation. Today, while there are significant numbers of women pastors and missionaries in Pentecostal groups, the most prominent Christian women featured in mainstream media are Bible teachers who reach women

only.

7. **Some Christians hate women.** It's sad but true. Misogyny is alive and well, and sometimes it is even preached from pulpits. In one prominent evangelical church in El Salvador, the previous pastor often joked about women and trivialized adultery. It's no wonder domestic violence thrives in that country. Until some brave men have the guts to challenge the sexism of the "good ol' boy network," abuse will remain a problem among Christians.

The church in Asia is blessed to have women like Naomi Dowdy and Haziell Minoza on the front lines. On this side of the world, I pray we will affirm and celebrate all women who have been called by God to lead.

Never Build a Ministry on One Man's Swag

John the Baptist said he was not worthy to untie Jesus' lowly sandals. But in today's hyper-cool, megachurch culture, a preacher's footwear has become very pricey.

So pricey, in fact, that a new Instagram account called [preachersnsneakers](#) went viral last month and now has 154,000 followers. The social media account does nothing except offer photos of famous preachers' expensive and colorful footwear—including a pair of red Air Yeezy 2s worn by South Carolina pastor John Gray. His shoes retail for \$5,611.

Some people have complained about the Instagram site, claiming that its founder, an anonymous guy named "Tyler," is hurting

the church. But he says he's simply holding up a mirror and asking Christians if our leaders should be known for their lavish tastes in clothes.

There's really nothing new about this. In the 1980s, televangelists were criticized for their three-piece suits and pricey Italian leather dress shoes—yet we know their followers gave them enough money to buy them private jets. Today, the suits and leather shoes are out of date, but the price tag on the designer sneakers is the same.

In today's vocabulary, it's called swag. It basically means stylish confidence, and it comes from the word "swagger."

Like the televangelist of the old days, the celebrity preacher of today may still be on television—or he may have his own YouTube channel. But his look has been totally updated. His hairstyle is hip, he has a few days' stubble on his face and his ministry has an app for your smartphone.

And apparently his on-stage wardrobe must now include a pair of \$1,000 Air Jordans.

I'm not against hair gel, stubble or the latest designer athletic shoes. I enjoy some of these preachers' podcasts. And, in their defense, some of these men received their fancy footwear as gifts from wealthy donors.

But I am concerned about the swag factor. Technology and youthful trendiness can breed pride if we're not careful. And pride is still pride, whether it is clothed in yesterday's neon polyester or today's jeans.

As ministry platforms grow larger, the potential for bigger egos grows more dangerous. Let's all take the humility test. We need less swag and more brokenness in the pulpit. Let's remember these basic biblical principles as we choose who to follow:

1. Christians should never worship preachers. Paul rebuked the people of Lystra when they called him and his companion Barnabas gods. Paul told the people: "We are also men of the same nature as you" (Acts 14:15b, NASB). True ministers of God will not allow their followers to place them on pedestals. Paul knew his proper role was to take the lowest seat, as a bondservant of Christ Jesus (see Phil. 1:1). He also knew that ministers must never allow flattery or adoration to inflate their egos.
2. Preachers must know who they are and who they aren't. When people spread a rumor that John the Baptist was the Messiah, he corrected them and said: "I am not the Christ. ... He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:28, 30, MEV). Even some of the most gifted Christian communicators can be seduced by the power of technology—and by the roar of a crowd—so that they actually believe they are in an elite category. No! We are nothing and He is everything. We must get out of the way so people can see Jesus!

Leaders who have not crucified the lust for self-promotion can become infatuated with the big and the sensational. They can build big churches with bigger projection screens, yet their character cannot sustain the pressure of spiritual warfare that inevitably comes. An out-of-control ego becomes a monster.

Author Henry Blackaby said it this way: "Nothing is more pathetic than having a small character in a big assignment. Many of us don't want to give attention to our character; we just want the big assignment from God."

3. Ministry is best accomplished with a team, not a celebrity. Paul laid the foundations of the church in the Gentile world, but he always shared the spotlight with Timothy, Silas, Barnabas, Titus, Phoebe, Priscilla and other co-workers—who suffered in prison with him and

faithfully preached alongside him. He didn't try to be five places at once; he trained people to take his place. And nobody on the team had swag!

It is becoming popular for large churches to open satellite campuses that offer video sermons from the same preacher. If this strategy is effectively reaching more converts, that's great. If preachers can do that and stay humble, keep it up. But let's be careful that we are not building ministry on one man's charisma.

Our ultimate goal should be for a whole new generation of people to be trained and empowered to serve, not for one man to build a show around his gift. And certainly not around his expensive Air Jordans.

An Inside Report From Sri Lanka's Traumatized Church

While members of Zion Church gathered last Sunday to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, children were meeting for a Sunday school lesson in another part of the building. At one point, their teacher asked the kids if they were willing to die for their faith. Every hand went up.

The teacher then led the children to the main sanctuary for morning worship. Suddenly a powerful bomb went off, sending chairs and body parts flying. "Half of the children died on the spot," says the Sunday school teacher. The assistant pastor's 10-year-old son was killed, along with nine other children from Zion.

Violence is nothing new for Christians in Sri Lanka, but the

horrific bombings that happened on April 21 leave a permanent scar. At least 321 people died in six blasts—three of which targeted churches during Easter services. Sri Lanka's government announced on Tuesday that suicide bombers affiliated with ISIS carried out the attacks.

A video released by ISIS on April 23 said the bombings were in retaliation for the March 15 attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. The video, which showed photos of three of the alleged suicide bombers, included this chilling message: "This bloody day is our reward to you."

I talked this week with a friend of mine in Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital, to understand how local Christians are handling the trauma after the Easter bombings. For security reasons, I'll call my friend Rahish.

You say Sri Lanka's church is no stranger to violence. Can you explain?

Rahish: We endured a civil war that lasted 30 years. It ended in 2009. Yet Sri Lanka ranks 44th on the 2018 Open Doors World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian. Christians here have been repeatedly targeted. Last year, there were 67 reported attacks on Christians between January and September alone.

Did you know any of the victims or any of the pastors affected by this week's bombings? What are they saying?

Rahish: I knew the pastor of Zion Church. I was there doing humanitarian work in 2004 when the tsunami hit Sri Lanka. They are dealing with so much pressure now. There is so much trauma because they lost so many children in their congregation.

What is the mood after the bombings? Are Christians in Sri Lanka living in fear?

Rahish: Yes. They are in fear for their lives. There is also

lingering uncertainty due to rumors of bombs being planted in other public places.

Reports say the group responsible for the bombings is tied to the Islamic State terrorist network, or ISIS. Yet Muslims are a small percentage of Sri Lanka's population. Are Muslims in your country aggressive or militant?

Rahish: Muslims in Sri Lanka are increasing in number, but they are a minority. Most Muslims in Sri Lanka are very peaceful, with one exception. Last year there were clashes between the majority ethnic group, the Sinhalese, and Muslims.

The government has not always been supportive of Christians. Do you feel supported now by the government?

Rahish: The government has not taken adequate actions regarding recent incidents of persecution. Last week, the Methodist Church in the city of Anuradhapura went through a lot of persecution. A Palm Sunday service had to be stopped due to stoning, yet police took a long time to respond to complaints made by the church leader.

We are especially grieved after learning that our defense secretary had been alerted that the Easter bombings might take place. Even though the government knew something might happen, they did not warn any of the churches or our citizens. It was a huge lack of responsibility by our government to protect its people. Yet at this time as people of God we must model forgiveness.

How will this incident affect missionaries coming in and out of the country?

Rahish: I don't think it will affect missionaries. But it is in their hands, whether they will let fear keep them away from Sri Lanka.

How are you asking global Christians to pray right now?

Rahish: Prayer is what we need. We started a 24-hour prayer chain asking the Lord that the intelligence units will be able to uncover the hidden work of terror. The prayers of Christians around the world have already made a huge difference. Many of the bombs planted by the terrorists have now been diffused.

Please pray for the church of Sri Lanka to be strong in the face of this suffering. Pray for the plots of the enemy to be uncovered and for any remaining bombs to be found and dismantled. Pray for the government to take responsible action to bring about justice. And pray for an end to this terror in Sri Lanka. We believe what the enemy meant for evil the Lord will turn around for good.

Don't Be So Quick to End Relationships

Anger has reached the boiling point in our country. Flight attendants remove fist-fighting passengers from planes. Entitled customers go berserk in checkout lines. Restaurant patrons spew racist rants. We are not just irritated. We are outraged.

It has become fashionable to lace our conversations and social media posts with profanity. Whether on talk radio, political television shows, Twitter, Instagram, online comment sections or street protests, we've developed the skill of dropping verbal bombs on each other.

We have become a vicious culture. We no longer care how our words hurt people. Our love has turned to ice.

And we are naive if we don't recognize this cold-hearted hatefulness is affecting Christians. I've noticed that people today get offended more easily and are much quicker to storm out of a church when something goes wrong. No wonder we have a huge percentage of Christians who end up as church dropouts.

The world tells us that ending a relationship is as easy as hitting the "unfriend" button. But when I read the Bible, I don't see any room for outrage, resentment, intolerance or unfriending. Jesus gives us the supernatural power to love when we don't feel like it.

Have you been experiencing some hateful drama in your life? Have you considered ending a relationship? Did you already walk out of a church or break a close friendship because of hurt? If so, examine your heart and ask these probing questions:

Am I giving up too soon? The apostle Paul told the Ephesians they should "always demonstrate gentleness and generous love toward one another, especially toward those who try your patience" (Eph. 4:2b, TPT). Your love will never grow unless it is stretched—and the best way to stretch your love is to show kindness when you feel like slamming a door in a person's face.

We often give up on relationships because we just don't want to exert the energy to improve them. Relationships require a lot of work. When you unfriend someone just because they hurt you, you miss an opportunity to become more like Christ. Show some patience. Choose to love even when you don't get anything in return.

Ephesians 4:3 (NLT) says we must "make every effort to keep [ourselves] united in the Spirit, binding [ourselves] together with peace." The Greek word for "make every effort" means "to be diligent; to use speed; to be prompt or earnest; to labor." That means you shouldn't let wounds fester. Act quickly to

repair the relationship before it gets worse!

Would Jesus close the door on this relationship? When you end a friendship because of an offense, you are doing the exact opposite of what Jesus did for you. Ephesians 4:32 (MEV) says: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you." You will never understand God's merciful love if you don't show it to others.

Jesus doesn't flippantly write people off. He loved us even when we were sinners, and He patiently drew us to Himself using "ropes of kindness and love" (Hos. 11:4b, NLT). Before you end a friendship, judge a pastor, storm out of a church or give someone the cold shoulder, remember how aggressively Jesus pursued a relationship with you. Let His kindness pull you out of your bad attitude.

When Peter asked Jesus how many times we are required to forgive a person, Jesus answered "seventy times seven" (Matt. 18:22b). Taken literally, that means 490 times—but Jesus didn't put a limit on forgiveness. He used the number seven to imply infinity. Stop counting how many times you have been offended and instead thank God for all the times He has overlooked your mistakes.

Am I nursing a grudge? Today's divisive political climate encourages people to get up angry in the morning, fuel their furor with hot political rhetoric throughout the day and then to go to bed after listening to more arguments on news broadcasts. We are poisoning ourselves.

Many Christians have allowed similar poison in their lives because of church drama. They rage because a pastor slighted them. They envy someone who took a position they wanted. They get angry because a Christian did something hypocritical.

Resentment is deadly. It puts a frown on your face and a sour tone in your voice. Don't let today's culture of outrage infect you. Go against the flow of toxic hate. Make a decision

today to work harder at relationships. Forgive those who hurt you. Be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit.

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8 Ways to Encourage the Flow of the Holy Spirit

I'm grateful for my friend Quentin Beard, who pastors one of the fastest growing churches in South Dakota—Sioux Falls First Assembly. Because Quentin wants his congregation to experience the Holy Spirit, he scheduled a special weekend of meetings so that people could be baptized in the Holy Spirit, get healing prayer and receive personal prophetic ministry.

The day before the event, I asked Quentin if we could have a larger-than-normal bottle of oil on the altar near the stage. Most churches just have a small cruet or vial of oil; I wanted more, so one of the church's pastors filled a half-gallon bottle. The quantity of oil was prophetic in itself, because

the Lord visited us in power. Many people were filled with the Spirit during those three days.

Are you hungry for more of the Holy Spirit in your church? It's time to stop limiting His power.

Everywhere I go, I hear pastors asking how they can we encourage the freedom of the Holy Spirit in a church culture that has become increasingly scripted, scheduled and controlled right down to the nanosecond. The essence of Pentecost, which came "suddenly," was its unpredictability. But there seems to be no room for God's sudden surprises when we already have our sermons planned out for the next six months.

Here are eight practical things we can do to encourage the freedom of Pentecost 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 Him to move and speak by giving Him the place He deserves.
2. **Leave room for personal prayer ministry.** A church without altar ministry is like a hospital without a maternity ward. New life 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 the operation of 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 deception, 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 just 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.
6. **Expose your church to healthy ministries that flow in the anointing.** God has raised up thousands of prophets who have not bowed their knees to the Baals of exploitation, greed and gimmicks. 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 expose our churches to men and women of character who are called to minister in the supernatural.

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.
8. **Preach about holiness.** Let's never forget that the Holy Spirit is holy. Many churches today have stopped warning God's people about the dangers of sin, so we don't confront anymore. We've figured out that people will pack the house if we give them sugary-sweet motivational pep talks that never step on toes. By avoiding the tough topics, we've essentially told the Holy Ghost to take a hike.

We will be celebrating Pentecost in a few weeks. 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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Are You Dripping With the Spirit's Anointing?

If you could go back in time and visit the tabernacle of Moses, one thing would immediately catch your attention. You would smell the strong fragrance of anointing oil. Everything inside the tent would have been dripping with this sweet-smelling compound, which was made of crushed cinnamon, myrrh and other spices mixed with olive oil.

God told Moses to pour the anointing oil on everything in that holy place. The Lord said the tent itself should be anointed with oil, as well as the ark of the covenant, the table of showbread, the lampstand, the incense altar, the laver and its stand, the altar of burnt offering and every utensil used during worship (see Ex. 30:26-28).

God also commanded Moses to anoint the priests (Ex. 30:30). It wasn't enough for the structure and all the furniture inside to be covered with the holy anointing. Anyone who was permitted to enter that sanctuary had to be anointed.

The church today should be the contemporary counterpart of the ancient tabernacle. In this age of the New Covenant, God wants His church to be dripping—not with physical oil but with the Holy Spirit's supernatural power!

That isn't what we see in most churches today. God told Moses to prepare the anointing oil in hefty, 1 1/2-gallon containers. Today, the tiny vials of oil we keep on our church altars are an accurate reflection of our low level of anointing. We have become satisfied with little or no oil. We are dry and powerless.

Ephesians 5:18 (NASB) has been a life verse for me since I was filled with the Holy Spirit as a young man. It says: "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit." God wants you to be filled to overflowing with His anointing. Why be dry when you can be saturated?

Here are six things that often cause us to limit the Holy Spirit in our lives:

1. **Doubt or intellectual pride.** Because I travel so much internationally, I've noticed that people in less-educated cultures are more eager to embrace the Holy Spirit's power. They also receive the gift of speaking in tongues more easily. Intellectual people rely on their reason. But spiritual experiences cannot be figured out with the mind! To receive the Spirit's infilling, you must display childlike faith (see Matt. 18:2-4).
2. **Religious tradition.** I knew an Episcopal priest who was filled with the Holy Spirit in the 1970s in New York City. He was excited about the new vitality he felt in his faith—and thrilled that his wife had experienced a physical healing. But when he shared his testimony with his bishop, he was told he was crazy! Religious people who are locked into "the way we've always done it" find it hard to receive the anointing of the Holy Spirit. You must be willing to break free from denominational tradition.
3. **Fear of the supernatural.** Some Christians grew up in denominations that taught against the infilling of the Holy Spirit. They were told that Pentecostals are all fanatics who go into trances, speak mindless gibberish and swing from chandeliers. Actually, the first disciples in the New Testament spoke in tongues and experienced miracles—yet their faith was not strange.

They were modeling biblical faith for all of us! People who are afraid of God's supernatural power will struggle to receive it.

4. **Unconfessed sin.** The Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit can be "quenched" as well as "grieved" (1 Thess. 5:19, Eph. 4:30). This is why it's so important for us to walk in constant communion with God and to be willing to repent quickly when we know we have sinned. If you want to be filled with the Spirit, you must be willing to open the closets of your heart and invite God's holiness into every dark corner of your life.
5. **Emotional wounds.** Some people are just too burdened with emotional baggage to be filled with the Spirit. Some have been abused, others are weighed down by anxiety, others are grieved or depressed. They need healing first. Like Lazarus on the day he was raised from the dead, they are bound by the grave clothes of the past, and they need to be unwrapped before they can experience God's full anointing (see John 11:44). Healing is often needed before a person can receive the blessing of Holy Spirit baptism.
6. **An unyielded spirit.** You cannot be filled with the Holy Spirit if you are full of yourself. Some people are too willful. They have not surrendered their plans, finances, relationships or time to God. They have their lives planned out and they don't want God interrupting their agendas. Yet God is looking to fill hearts that have been emptied and surrendered. Only the fully yielded can experience the fullness of His power.

If you have not received the baptism of the Holy Spirit, or if the flow of the Spirit has been blocked in your life, empty your heart and prepare for your own personal Pentecost. God wants to pour the anointing oil on you until you are overflowing.

How to Stay Renewed in the Spirit—Even in Old Age

This past weekend I preached at the historic Belmont Church in Nashville, Tennessee, a congregation that God used powerfully to spread charismatic renewal across the world in the 1970s. This was the church that gave us actor Pat Boone, Christian singers Amy Grant and Michael W. Smith, and many anointed songwriters and outreach ministries.

For years, Belmont was led by Don Finto, a brave spiritual pioneer who was willing to challenge old denominational mindsets after he had a profound experience with the Holy Spirit as a leader in the Church of Christ. Don “retired” from his pulpit at Belmont in 1996, but he didn’t even begin to slow down. He launched Caleb Company, an aptly-named ministry that focuses on mentoring and outreach to Middle Eastern countries.

I interviewed Finto on the phone for *Charisma* a few times over the years, but I met him for the first time last Sunday. He was seated on the second row, beaming with all the energy of a 30-year-old. I learned before the service that he is 89.

If you ask Finto his age, he emphatically says: “I’m 89 years young.”

My good friend Paul Gonzalez, who serves as Belmont’s teaching pastor, told me that Finto traveled to the Middle East last month with a team from the church. After the team finished their mission and flew back to the United States, Finto flew on to a few other countries. He is a true road warrior.

“Papa Don keeps the pace of a man half his age,” said

Gonzalez. “He carries boundless joy. His laugh is deep and genuine, and nearly everything he says he does so with a hearty laugh.”

What’s the secret to this kind of youthful energy in old age? Finto embodies principles that many of us need to grab now. Do you want to live long and finish strong? Here are a few tips:

1. **Keep yourself physically fit.** Unless you are intentional about exercising regularly and eating healthy now, your body won’t be strong in your 90s. If you carry around a lot of extra weight in your 40s, your heart or joints may fail—even in your 50s. Make a decision today to treat your body like a temple of the Holy Spirit so you can live longer.
2. **Let God’s passions become yours.** People who are consumed with God’s purposes have an inner drive that renews them. Isaiah 40:31 says it best: “But those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint.” An intentional focus on Jesus will give you extra energy—and the same boundless joy that makes Finto laugh so much.

British Christian leader George Mueller demonstrated this youthful energy in old age. When he was 70, he embarked on a 17-year period of missionary travel that took him to 33 countries. (This was before air travel, so he sailed on slow-moving ships.) It was his passion to share Christ with the world that kept Mueller moving at a frenetic pace until age 87. He died at 92.

3. **Hang around young people and invest in them.** Finto is known in Nashville as a mentor to younger leaders. Even though he turned Belmont Church over to his successors more than 20 years ago, he continues to provide coaching

and fatherly counsel to the next generation. You are more likely to find him mentoring and worshiping with a group of 20-somethings than playing shuffleboard with retirees.

4. **Stay in step with the Holy Spirit.** Finto made a decision long ago to move with the cloud of the Holy Spirit. When the charismatic renewal hit this country in the 1970s, he didn't dig in his heels and cling to old religious wineskins. He broke away from Church of Christ traditions and moved the church into a season of fruitful growth.

Finto is a modern Caleb—and he reminds me of that biblical patriarch. Caleb said at age 85: “I am still as strong today as I was in the day Moses sent me; as my strength was then, so my strength is now, for war and for going out and coming in.” Caleb never looked for a comfort zone. He never parked on yesterday's victories. He was always looking for the next challenge, and eager to embrace the new thing God is doing.

No matter how old you are, I hope you will decide to live a life of spiritual passion. Don't let life grow dull. Let the Holy Spirit renew your strength until your last breath.

Captain Marvel, Women Superheroes and the Church

Some Christians think it's sinful to go to movies. That's not my conviction. While I avoid films with profanity and gratuitous sex, I'm a total movie buff. And I especially love it when a film inspires me, makes me laugh or cry or reinforces a basic Christian principle.

I believe movies have become the language of our generation. So if I'm going to reach people with the gospel, I will likely need to use every available cultural reference to convey that message. That's why I'm not against using a movie clip in a sermon.

If the apostle Paul were alive today, he'd likely borrow material from the latest blockbuster to make his point. He quoted secular poetry, reasoned with Greek philosophers and told the Corinthians: "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22b). Paul knew he had to be relevant to his culture to reach his audience.

I didn't go to see Captain Marvel expecting a faith message. Most superhero movies are pure popcorn entertainment, big on CGI effects and lacking in serious character development. And since Captain America and the Black Panther are already my favorite comic book heroes (apologies to Thor fans), I didn't expect to be impressed by the story of a woman named Carol Danvers who ends up becoming the equivalent of a human atomic blowtorch after she is (spoiler alert!) exposed to an alien radiation blast.

But by the end of the film I was cheering—especially during the short mid-credits scene when we learn that Danvers, aka Captain Marvel, will join the other Avengers in their next movie, *Avengers: Endgame*. Apparently when the evil Thanos begins wiping out most of the universe, this female superhero will show up to help Captain America, Black Widow, Thor, Hulk and Ant-Man save the day.

Wait a minute ... a woman is going to win the final Avengers battle? Lots of fans got upset when they learned that the creators of Captain Marvel made the character a woman. Marvel Comics actually had several superheroes by the name of Captain Marvel, of both genders. But when Avengers fans realized where this story was headed, some saw it as a feminist plot.

Keep in mind, we are talking about a movie based on comic books. This is fiction, people. It's a story that involves a talking raccoon, a man from another planet who carries a magic hammer and a man who can shrink himself to microscopic size at will. Yet when some people learned that Captain Marvel was a female Air Force pilot whose DNA was manipulated after she was taken to another galaxy, they launched a protest.

So basically there are many people out there who have a problem with the concept of female superheroes. Captain Marvel doesn't fit our traditional narrative about women being weak and demure while men do all the heavy lifting. This idea is pervasive in many churches, where women are expected to play minor roles while the men lead, preach and make decisions.

For many years, I've questioned this guys-always-lead narrative because I don't see it in Scripture. The book of Acts tells us that when the early disciples were baptized in the Holy Spirit, God's fire came upon both men and women. Everyone was ignited. Everybody in the upper room became a superhero after that experience—empowered to heal the sick, cast out demons and transform nations.

And after that spiritual explosion, Peter announced that the old patriarchal rules had changed. He declared: "'In the last days it shall be,' says God ... your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17a). Women played a limited role under the Old Covenant—even though there were exceptions like Deborah, Esther and Miriam. But when the fire of the Spirit showed up in the New Covenant era, the door opened for women to be preachers, missionaries, justice activists, prophets and world changers.

Captain Marvel reminds us that we need some flame-throwing, demon-stomping, Holy Ghost-filled women superheroes today to finish the job of evangelizing the world. This task Jesus gave us cannot be finished by guys alone. We need all hands on deck. Men in the church should be less intimidated by strong

women and more welcoming of their spiritual gifts.

Just as Nick Fury sent Captain Marvel a distress signal, asking her to hurry back to Earth to crush Thanos, I'm sending a message too. I'm asking every woman of God to suit up. Let the Holy Spirit empower you. We need you to join this battle.

Don't Be So Quick to End Relationships

Anger has reached the boiling point in our country. Passengers are being removed from planes because they started fistfights. Entitled store customers are going berserk in checkout lines. Restaurant patrons are spewing racist rants—and they don't even care if someone records their vile words on camera for the world to hear.

We are not just irritated. We are outraged. It has become fashionable to lace our conversations and social media posts with profanity. Whether it's talk radio, political television shows, Twitter, Instagram, online comment sections or street protests, we've developed the skill of dropping verbal bombs on each other.

We don't care how our words hurt people anymore. We have become a vicious culture. Our love has turned to ice.

And we are naïve if we don't recognize this dangerous level of cold-hearted hatefulness is affecting Christians. I've noticed that people today get offended more easily and are much quicker to storm out of a church when something goes wrong. No wonder we have a huge percentage of Christians who are church dropouts.

The world tells us that ending a relationship is as easy as hitting the unfriend button. But when I read the Bible I don't see any room for outrage, resentment, intolerance or "unfriending." Jesus calls us to love—and He gives us the supernatural power to do it.

Have you been experiencing some hateful drama in your life? Have you considered ending a relationship? Did you already walk out of a church, or break a close friendship, because of hurt? If so, examine your heart and ask these probing questions first:

1. Am I giving up too soon? The apostle Paul told the Ephesians that they should "always demonstrate gentleness and generous love toward one another, especially toward those who try your patience" (Eph. 4:2, Passion Translation). Your love will never grow unless it is stretched—and the best way to stretch your love is to show kindness when you feel like slamming a door in a person's face.

The truth is that we often give up on relationships because we just don't want to exert the energy to improve them. Relationships require a lot of work. When you unfriend someone just because they hurt you, you are missing an opportunity to become more like Christ. Show some patience. Choose to love even when you don't get anything in return.

Ephesians 4:3 says we must "make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace" (New Living Translation). The Greek word for "make every effort" means "to be diligent; to use speed; to be prompt or earnest; to labor." That means you shouldn't let wounds fester. Act quickly to repair the relationship before it gets worse!

2. Would Jesus end this relationship? When you end a friendship because of an offence, you are doing the

exact opposite of what Jesus did for you. Ephesians 4:32 says: “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you” (NASB). You will never understand God’s merciful love if you don’t show it to others.

Jesus doesn’t flippantly write people off. He loved us even when we were sinners, and He patiently drew us to Himself using “ropes of kindness and love” (Hosea 11:4, NLT). Before you end a friendship, judge a pastor, storm out of a church or give someone a cold shoulder, remember how aggressively Jesus pursued a relationship with you. Let His ropes of kindness pull you out of your bad attitude.

When Peter asked Jesus how many times we are required to forgive a person, Jesus answered “seventy times seven” (see Matthew 18:22). Taken literally, that means 490 times—but Jesus wasn’t putting a limit on forgiveness. He was using the number seven to imply infinity. Stop counting how many times you have been offended and instead thank God for all the times He has overlooked your mistakes.

3. Am I nursing a grudge? Today’s culture of outrage tells us that it’s fashionable to be angry. Our divisive political climate encourages people to get up mad in the morning, fuel their anger with hot political rhetoric throughout the day and then to go to bed after listening to more arguments on news broadcasts. We are literally poisoning ourselves.

Many Christians have allowed similar poison in their lives because of church drama. They are mad that a pastor slighted them. They are jealous of someone who took a position they wanted. They are angry because a Christian did something hypocritical (yet they refuse to admit that their bitterness is the ultimate hypocrisy!)

Resentment is deadly. It actually makes people sick. It also

makes us ugly and unpleasant. Unforgiveness puts a frown on your face, wrinkles around your eyes and a sour tone in your voice. On the flip side, showing affection is healthy for you. Doctors have proven that a 20-second hug strengthens your immune system!

Don't let today's culture of outrage infect you. Go against the flow of toxic hate. Make a decision today to work harder at relationships. Show some love. Forgive those who hurt you. Be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit.

Why Are We Afraid to Preach About Sin?

I don't like angry preachers. If a person mixes a sermon with hateful language, he's in the wrong profession. Yet today we've jumped to the opposite extreme. Now we are so afraid of sounding angry that we stopped confronting sin altogether.

We can't preach about materialism because we might offend rich people in the audience—as well as the poor people who buy Lotto tickets every week. We can't preach about fornication because there are people in the church who are living together. We can't preach about adultery or homosexuality because our culture says it's hateful to label those behaviors sins.

We can't preach about domestic violence because there are deacons who sometimes hit their wives. We can't preach about abortion because there might be pro-choice Democrats in the pews (or hypocritical Republicans who say they are pro-life but who secretly pay for abortions for their own daughters). And in the Trump era, we can't challenge racist attitudes

toward immigrants because evangelical Christians are expected to blindly support a wall to keep Mexicans out of our country.

And the list goes on. In fact, some preachers are avoiding the word "sin" altogether because it's too "negative." Church growth experts tell us that people want a "positive" message.

This temptation to dilute the gospel has produced a new recipe for a trendy sermon. We start with some great motivational speaking ("Your past does not define your future!"), add a few quarts of cheap grace ("Don't focus on your sin!"), pour in some prosperity gospel ("Run to this altar and grab your financial breakthrough!"), flavor it with some trendy pop psychology ("It's all about you!") and you end up with a goopy mess of pabulum that not even a baby Christian could survive on.

I've often wondered how the apostle Paul would view our weak-kneed American gospel. Just before he was martyred, Paul gave his spiritual son Timothy clear instructions on how to keep his message on track. He said, "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction" (2 Tim. 4:2, NASB).

We've rewritten Paul's words today. Our rule is, "Preach what the people want to hear! Avoid controversy! Stroke, soothe and pacify the people so they will come back next week!" Is it any wonder this low-protein spiritual diet has produced an anemic church?

Paul's preaching in the first century was unquestionably confrontational. He didn't hold back from addressing sin, nor was he afraid to call sin what it is. Paul knew a spineless Christianity would produce spineless Christians. He told Timothy that biblical preaching would require three brave verbs:

1. **Reprove.** The Greek word here, *elegcho*, means "to convict, admonish or expose" or "to show one his fault."

The word can also mean “to scold” or “to reprimand.” Anyone who has ever been on the receiving end of a mother’s discipline knows that reproof can be the purest form of love.

2. **Rebuke.** The word *epitimao* means “to admonish strongly” or “to charge strictly.” The English definition means “to express sharp, stern disapproval.” And the origin of the word means “to beat or strike.” I’m not talking here about a preacher who beats people with the Bible. Screaming at people is not biblical rebuke. But when was the last time you felt the Holy Spirit strike you in your conscience during a sermon because the preacher was truthful?
3. **Exhort.** This is the gentlest of the three words. *Parakaleo* can be used to mean “to comfort” or “to call alongside.” It’s the same root word used to describe the Holy Spirit, who is our Comforter. True biblical preaching not only exposes sin and warns us of its consequences, but it calls us to reach out to God for help to overcome our weakness. When we challenge sin, we must point people to deliverance and healing. Biblical preaching is never condemning—it provides hope!

Paul was also not afraid to name sins. I recently did a survey of all of Paul’s epistles to see how he addressed sexual immorality. I discovered that he confronted sexual sin head-on in 10 of his 13 epistles. He boldly called out adultery, fornication, sensuality and homosexuality in a culture that was saturated in hedonism.

After exhorting the Thessalonians to practice abstinence, he rebuked them sternly by saying that anyone who opposes God’s laws about sex “is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you” (1 Thess. 4:8b). Those are forceful words. They need to be repeated in our pulpits today.

Paul wasn’t trying to win any popularity contests, and his

comments about sex would get him blacklisted if he tried to buy airtime today. Yet when he penned those tough words, he was speaking from God's heart—with love—under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to all of us.

It's time for us to grow a backbone. Let's get rid of weak Christianity, spineless preachers and jellyfish morals. Let's preach the message of the Bible instead of a neutered version. Let's not only point out sin but also point people to the only hope they have of overcoming it—our strong Savior, whose death on the cross was the ultimate confrontation of sin.