

# Are You Called to Speak? Don't Run From Your Assignment

On a recent Sunday, I stood in a pulpit, looked out over a congregation of mostly strangers, cleared the lump in my throat and preached a message that the Lord had laid on my heart from the Bible.

Thousands of men and women speak publicly like this every week. It's what preachers do. But even though I speak often, I've found that preaching the gospel is one of the most frightening assignments anyone could attempt. I feel as if I die a thousand deaths right before I do it, and I die several more times after I go home and evaluate what happened.

After one discouraging experience in which an audience stared coldly at me with their arms folded, I determined that preaching surely must not be my calling. I shared my struggle with an older pastor.

"Sometimes I feel discouraged after I speak," I said. "Does that ever happen to you?" I was sure he would counsel me to stop preaching.

His answer shocked me. "Son, I feel that way every Monday morning."

When I tell friends that I stubbornly resisted the call of God to preach because of my lack of confidence, they act surprised. They think most people who stand in pulpits want to be there. Think again!

We assume God always chooses gifted orators. But true preaching is not a natural exercise, like any other form of public speaking. It is one of the most supernatural tasks

anyone can ever be called to do. It requires an imperfect human vessel to yield himself (or herself) to speak the very words of God.

If we deliver our message in our own human ability, the results will be miserable; but if we wholly trust the power of the Holy Spirit, prophetic preaching unleashes supernatural anointing.

Most preachers in the Bible were reluctant. Moses made excuses about stuttering. Gideon tried to disqualify himself, blabbering on and on about his weaknesses. Jeremiah complained about the responsibility of carrying a prophetic burden. And Jonah bought a one-way ticket to the other side of the Mediterranean Sea so he wouldn't have to give his unpopular sermon to the people of Nineveh.

As long as God has been anointing people to speak for Him, people have been running from their assignments—and giving God all kinds of creative excuses for their delinquency.

The apostle Paul, who was a silver-tongued Pharisee before he met Christ, was stripped of his eloquence before he preached the gospel throughout the Roman empire. He felt weak and totally incapable when he spoke.

He told the Corinthians: “I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:3-5).

Think about it: The premier apostle of the first century trembled as he spoke. Yet God used his words to spread the message of Jesus Christ throughout the known world.

Revivalist Arthur Katz, who died in 2007, wrote about the power of true preaching in his 1999 book *Apostolic Foundations*: “The only one qualified to preach ... is the one

who wants to run the other way, like Jonah. ... The man who sighs and groans when called upon to speak, who does not want to be there, who feels terribly uncomfortable ... is the man out of whose mouth the word of true preaching is most likely to come.”

That is certainly not the way most of us view pulpit ministry today. We celebrate the smooth and the polished. We look for the cool, hipster delivery style. We measure the impact of a sermon not by whether hearts are slain by conviction but by how high the people jump when the preacher tells them what they want to hear.

That kind of carnal preaching may win the accolades of men, boost TV ratings and even build megachurches. But the kingdom is not built on smug self-confidence. We need God’s words. The church will live in spiritual famine until broken, reluctant, weak and trembling preachers allow His holy fire to come out of their mouths.

If you have a message from God, stop making excuses. Run instead to heaven’s altar, raise your hands in total surrender and let the Holy Spirit touch your mouth with a burning coal. Die to your fears, doubts and excuses, and let a holy anointing intensify within you until it becomes like fire shut up in your bones.

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## **How America’s Witches Are Stirring the Political**

# Cauldron

A woman named Astrea writes a blog called “Starlight Witch.” Describing herself as a “polytheistic pagan,” she offers her followers detailed instructions about how to cast spells on President Donald Trump.

She makes her incantations at the stroke of midnight, Eastern Standard Time, when the moon is just a tiny crescent. First she calls on several of her favorite “warrior goddesses,” and then lights a candle.

Then she declares: “I beseech thee in my name and in the name of all who walk, crawl, swim, or fly; in the name of all the trees, the forests, streams, deserts, rivers and seas; in the name of Justice and Liberty and Love and Equality and Peace! Bind them in chains. Bind their tongues! Bind their works! Bind their wickedness!”

Astrea claims that more than 30,000 witches and pagans engage in this ritual monthly. It may seem far-fetched, but witchcraft has become a political movement in this country, fueled by fear and—in some cases—feminist anger.

- An organization called Witch the Vote seeks to mobilize pagans to become political activists. On its website, which offers “Witch the Vote” pins, buttons and tote bags, it urges followers to vote for the most “progressive” candidates—and includes in its list of favorites Arizona gubernatorial candidate Kelly Fryer (who is described by Witch the Vote as “a true witch”), Texas Democrat Collin Allred and numerous congressional candidates from New York and Massachusetts.
- Last month, author Michael M. Hughes released a book called *Magic for the Resistance: Rituals and Spells for Change*. Reviewers describe it as “a fascinating look at how the occult arts can be used to promote progressive

politics and social change.”

- A group known as The Magic Resistance encourages regular gatherings to cast spells on President Trump. Through their Facebook page, they recently encouraged similar “hexing” of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh during his confirmation process. Those who participated were asked to light a white candle, place a justice tarot card on an altar and then wrap black thread around a paper doll—symbolizing Kavanaugh. A pagan bookstore in Brooklyn, New York, also hosted a recent “Hex Kavanaugh” event to stop the nominee from winning confirmation.
- An article published this month in Vox magazine says modern-day witches are using rituals not only to influence elections but also to bring healing to themselves if they are discouraged by the current political scene. One Wiccan group prescribed a “gratitude spell” for Christine Blasey Ford, the woman who accused Kavanaugh of sexual abuse during his confirmation hearings. The spell involves pouring salt in the hand, writing “I believe you” on a sheet of paper, pouring the salt on the paper and then picturing Ford reading the note.
- Katelan Foisy, a Native American artist, told Vox that she engages in a ritual that involves the Deer Woman, a female spirit that is common in Native legends. The Deer woman, she explained, was raped and left for dead—but she returned to drive her attackers insane and to eventually kill them. “I call on Deer Woman to aid in these times,” Foisy said. “I call on my ancestors to rise up and expose the truth.”

What do we make of all this? I’ve lived through 12 presidents, and I’ve never known the spiritual climate to be so intense that witches were casting spells on the White House. In light of this strange phenomenon, there are three things the

Christian community should remember:

1. The pagan/Wiccan community needs Christ. We shouldn't be angry at people who seek to manipulate our nation with witchcraft. A growing segment of the American population claims no religious affiliation—and they are open to any and every dark spiritual influence. They need to hear about the love of Jesus. Don't be threatened by witches—they need God's mercy just like everyone else.
2. Witchcraft is no match for God's power. We know from the story of Elijah that the prophets of Baal couldn't call fire from heaven, no matter how loud they chanted their incantations. The Bible says of idols: "They have mouths, but they cannot speak" (Psalm 115:5). Witchcraft is actually a cruel hoax. Those who trust in the power of hexes, spells and the occult will be disappointed.
3. The prayers of faithful Christians can move heaven and earth. Our nation is waiting to see real fire fall. This miracle happens when God's people pray in the name of Jesus. We don't have to throw salt, wait for the stroke of midnight or for a crescent moon, or build a weird altar. Jesus made us this promise in John 15:7: "If you remain in Me, and My words remain in you, you will ask whatever you desire, and it shall be done for you."

There is power in the name of Jesus! In this challenging season of America's history, let's lift our voices together and raise up a tidal wave of prayer that will drive out spiritual darkness.

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## Is There Healing After the

# Kavanaugh Crisis?

Since 2001, I've devoted my life to bringing the healing of Jesus to women—mostly in developing nations where domestic violence is the norm. I build shelters to protect women. I pay school fees for girls who are denied education. I provide counseling for rape victims. I teach men who have been abusers how to treat women with respect.

I do this because I'm a Christian. I believe Jesus fights to protect the powerless from the powerful. He stood up for a woman who was accused of adultery. He healed a woman whose bleeding made her a social outcast. He defended widows and showed mercy to prostitutes.

I am a justice crusader because God is a God of justice. But if you search through my wallet, you will also learn that I am a registered Republican. That may shock some people who think only Democrats believe in social justice!

I have friends on both sides of today's divisive political spectrum. For the record I consider myself a "compassionate conservative"—a term popularized by President George W. Bush. I believe in conservative economic policies rather than big government spending. I despise socialism because I've seen how it makes developing nations even poorer while enriching a few. And I love immigrants, so the current anti-immigrant sentiment among some Republicans disturbs me deeply.

I try to apply my faith to my politics—and I try to vote according to my faith principles. I also try to show respect to those who don't agree with me, which means 1) I don't use hateful language or profanity to denounce Democrats, and 2) I don't post political vitriol on my social media pages to stir up more division.

In other words, I try to act like a Christian in this age of political outrage. I try to be a peacemaker. And in the end, I

try to bring the truth of Jesus to a broken world that cannot be fixed, ultimately, by Republicans or Democrats.

Because of my commitment to justice for women, it was difficult for me to watch the spectacle that unfolded two weeks ago when senators fought hard to either confirm or block President Trump's nominee to the Supreme Court, Brett Kavanaugh. When Dr. Christine Blasey Ford brought her allegations against Kavanaugh, the volatile issue of sexual abuse touched a national nerve and stoked the fires of political fury.

In the end, Kavanaugh was confirmed, Republicans celebrated and Democrats vowed to retaliate. But as I prayerfully tried to make sense of what happened in those confirmation hearings, I applied my faith and made these conclusions:

**1. Victims of sexual abuse always deserve compassion.** I felt only sympathy for Dr. Christine Blasey Ford when she shared her testimony of abuse with members of the Senate Judiciary Committee on Sept. 27. I have no question that she went through something horrific as a teenager—and her trauma was intensified by having to talk about something so painful on national television.

In the end, there wasn't enough evidence to prove to senators that Kavanaugh was the man who forced himself on Ford some 36 years ago. But if Ford's memory was clouded because of the trauma of abuse, she and all abuse victims like her still need support, counseling and prayer. Dr. Ford certainly doesn't deserve judgment, death threats or public ridicule for sharing her story. Please don't let the politics of this incident harden your heart toward abuse victims.

**2. People who are accused of abuse also deserve fair treatment.** Some feminist groups began circulating a mantra during the Kavanaugh hearings that demanded: "Believe all women." The implication is that all allegations of sexual

abuse are always true, and there's no possibility that a woman would make up a false allegation or be confused about the circumstances of an abuse experience.

Yet our justice system demands that defendants are innocent until proven guilty. That's what protects people from character assassination. I've seen a lot of cases of abuse over the 17 years I've been involved in aiding victims—and typically the woman is hesitant to confront the man because of fear. But I have also seen cases when false accusations were made to harm a person. Biblical justice is not just for abuse victims; it also protects those who are wrongly accused.

**3. Not all women believe all sexual abuse allegations.** It was ironic that a female Republican senator, Susan Collins of Maine, provided the most compelling argument for confirming Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court. Her 40-minute speech to her colleagues was a reminder that even though men outnumber women in the U.S. Senate 77 to 23, we have outstanding female lawmakers who are articulate, level-headed and persuasive. (Collins' speech actually swayed one senator who was on the fence, West Virginia Democrat Joe Manchin, to vote yes—giving Kavanaugh the 51 votes needed.)

The Kavanaugh hearings proved that American women don't walk in lockstep. They are not a monolithic bloc. In fact, 69 percent of Republican women supported Kavanaugh and did not believe there was enough evidence to prove he was the person who attacked Ford during the summer of 1982, as she alleged. Those women believe Kavanaugh has the integrity needed to sit on the nation's highest court.

**4. Our nation is more deeply divided than ever by gender issues.** Because of the Kavanaugh appointment, some feminist organizations have vowed to unseat Republican senators in next month's elections. Some angry men in the extreme alt-right movement will use the whole incident to strengthen their message of male superiority. It's a set-up for all-out gender

war. And President Trump, who is known for his harsh rhetoric, could trigger more animosity with his tweets and sound bites.

It's time to pray. I urge all believers in Christ, whether you lean conservative or liberal, Republican or Democrat, to pursue justice in the purest biblical sense. Rise above the divisions of party and politics. Don't let the media determine your attitude—let the Holy Spirit show you how to be a voice for healing and reconciliation to our fractured country.

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## **Beware of Hyperspiritual, Lone Ranger Christians**

I'm unapologetically a charismatic Christian, and I believe all the gifts of the Holy Spirit are available to us today. It's tragic that so many churches in this country limit or even deny the validity of the Holy Spirit's power.

Yet in my years of ministry in the charismatic movement, I've learned that if the devil can't convince a church to reject the Holy Spirit's work, he will push people to the opposite extreme so that they misuse or abuse the gifts of the Spirit and drift into deception. Our critics call us "charismaniacs" when this happens—and too often we deserve the label.

In my recent travels I've noticed an upsurge in hyperspiritual "super prophets" who make wild claims and attract fans based on their fascinating revelations. These people claim to be on a higher plane than everyone else, but the fruit of their ministry is never good in the end. They may say they have secret biblical knowledge; they may claim to be in communication with angels; they may simply exude an attitude of spiritual superiority—and people are gullible enough to

fall for it.

Nothing is more dangerous to genuine revival than a hyper-spiritual charismaniac who flaunts his gifts while displaying a lack of character. These elitists are slick; they can get sincere Christians to say “Ooooh” and “Aahhh” when they minister. But in the end, they bring division in the church.

In the book of Jude, these renegade imposters are compared to comets because they aren't accountable to anyone in the church. False prophets, Jude said, are “wandering stars for whom the gloom of darkness has been kept forever” (see v. 13).

Here are seven indicators of a hyperspiritual person. Heed the warning signals!

1. Their feet rarely touch the earth. Super spiritual people live in the ozone layer. They are not in touch with normal life. They may spend lots of time in prayer (or claim to), and they may even fast or impose severe discipline on themselves, but their relationships are dysfunctional. Remember: Jesus did not live His life like a guru, floating around while dispensing spooky wisdom. He lived in the real world and interacted in a practical way with people. So should we.

2. They place too much emphasis on spiritual manifestations. God speaks to us through His Spirit, and He can use dreams, visions or prophetic words. Yet His message always flows with love and brings peace. On the contrary, a spirit of weirdness usually follows hyperspiritual people who claim to receive constant revelations. Paul warned the Colossians about people like this when he said: “Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen” (Col. 2:18a, NASB).

3. They find it difficult to submit to authority. Hyper-spiritual people are usually full of pride and believe they are more gifted than pastors or other spiritual leaders.

Therefore they find it impossible to receive instruction or correction from anyone. They have no mentors because they feel they are spiritually superior. They become renegades, and they separate themselves from the body of Christ.

4. They crave attention. A super-spiritual person often lacks affirmation and love. Their emotional deficit pushes them to seek attention from people, and they find it by impressing others. Some people who seek to serve as intercessors or counselors, or even as members of the worship team, may actually need inner healing before they can be effective in these roles. If you give these people a microphone before they are healed, you will regret it!

5. They develop a victim mentality. Most of the hyper-spiritual people I know believe they are constantly being attacked by the devil—as if they are his biggest threat. The slightest problem in life—from a traffic ticket to a hangnail—becomes evidence of a demonic conspiracy against them. We need to remind them they are not the center of the universe.

6. They become harsh and judgmental. Charismaniacs who don't find a receptive audience for their visions and prophecies sometimes become bitter and resentful—and they end up condemning everyone to hell for rejecting them. I am aware of situations in which angry Christians ended up splitting a church because they became convinced the pastor was evil or the whole congregation was in sin. People who are full of bitterness will become instruments of the devil. Deal with them before they hurt others!

7. They often end up in deception. Super spiritual people who reject correction or spiritual covering are headed toward disaster. Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, started that cult after he declared that all Christian denominations were false churches. He cut himself off from the body of Christ and started the biggest heresy of the 19th century. People who

become so focused on their spiritual superiority end up denying Jesus and justifying their own sinful behavior.

Church should be a healthy place. Don't let hyper-spiritual people take you or your congregation down the wrong road.  
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## **Let's Be Honest—Christian Women Have Been Hurt in Church**

Comedian Bill Cosby wasn't laughing yesterday when he was led out of a Pennsylvania courtroom in handcuffs. He was sentenced to prison for drugging and sexually assaulting a woman 14 years ago. The judge in the case labeled Cosby "a sexually violent predator"—a statement that brought tears of relief to dozens of Cosby's other alleged victims.

Welcome to the uncomfortable #MeToo era. Ever since Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein was accused almost a year ago of forcing actresses to trade sex for acting jobs, sexual harassment has become the dominant headline in America. Everyone is staring at this elephant in the room—especially women, who once were too afraid to talk about it.

Yet I have found that we really aren't talking enough in the church about the obvious tension between the genders.

Christian women are deeply wounded—not just because of sexual abuse but also because of blatant gender prejudice and insensitive comments from their brothers in Christ.

I decided to do an informal poll on social media yesterday. I asked my female friends on Facebook and Twitter to share what they considered the rudest comments or behavior they had endured from men in a church setting. Reading their answers (some were posted publicly, and many privately) was overwhelming. I divided their responses into categories:

**1. Blatant sexual abuse.** Many of the women I polled were victims of abuse that happened on church property. One woman from Alabama said she was groped and fondled by a church leader when she was a teenager—and she never went back to church until she gave her heart to Christ at age 30. Another woman was raped in the church parking lot, and no one on the church staff intervened or offered pastoral care.

**2. Come-ons and inappropriate touching.** Numerous women I contacted experienced this. One said that two married men reached over and kissed her, but she refused their unwanted advances. Another woman said a pastor looked down her shirt while standing over her. A female missionary said she was terrified after an ordained minister groped and fondled her. Several women said they felt uncomfortable when men from the church ogled them, stalked them, made sexual comments or tried to hug them too closely.

**3. Bizarre gender bias.** A woman was counseled by a man in her church that she should not have an epidural during childbirth “because pain is part of a woman’s punishment for sin.” Another woman was told that she was in sinful violation of 1 Timothy 2:15 if she did not immediately start having babies regularly after getting married.

**4. Demands for “submission.”** One woman from Texas was told by a pastor that she must stay in her marriage regardless of her

husband's physical and verbal violence. "I stayed in a very abusive marriage for 20 years," she said. By the time she did divorce, her children had grown up. "Unfortunately, the abuse had ruined their chances of a healthy home life by that time," she added.

**5. Insensitivity to single women.** Several single women told me they were shamed publicly by men in the church with comments like "Why aren't you married yet?" or "What's wrong with you? Why are you still single?"

**6. Comments implying that women are always to blame for sexual sin.** One woman from Georgia needed a ride to the airport during a Christian conference, and she asked a male minister for help. He refused because he said he was not allowed to be in a car alone with another woman. "This wasn't harassment, but it was sexist in that I am a sister in Christ, a fellow minister," she said. Other women recalled being told in church that the reason men struggle with pornography is because women don't dress modestly. "I grew up feeling that I was to blame for men's porn addiction," one woman said.

**7. Blatant condescension.** A 30-year-old ordained woman from Georgia said she encounters subtle sexism when male ministers call her a "girl" after she preaches. "Men who are my age are not spoken to that way. They are treated as peers," she said. "Some people may not think twice about, and I know it's never meant in a bad way, but I feel it reveals how some people view a 30-something woman in ministry vs. how they view a 30-something man in ministry." Other women said they felt invisible because church leaders regularly referred to them as "John's wife" or "Bill's wife" rather than by their own first name.

**8. Refusal to affirm a woman's spiritual gifts or callings.** The majority of responses to my question related to this topic. Women have been told they should never preach or lead in the church, and some who did step out in their leadership

gifts were called “Jezebel” or worse. Others were installed in pastoral roles but not allowed to use the title “pastor.” Others were told that the only time God uses women in leadership “is when a man refuses to step into his rightful place.” (Almost all women called to full-time ministry shared stories of an uphill battle.)

I don’t believe the women I heard from this week are resentful. They are not grinding an axe or looking for ways to punish men. I know many of these women personally. Some of them hesitated to share their pain because they don’t want to be perceived as whiners or complainers. They have tended to be quiet about these injustices, and they only talked about them because I asked. They are godly women who simply want dignity and a seat at the table.

I believe it’s time for godly men to offer sincere apologies and genuine sensitivity. The devil wants to divide men and women, and he can manipulate the #MeToo movement to trigger a nasty gender war. We can diffuse that tension by changing our macho attitudes. It’s time for us to listen to each other and value each other. It’s time to stop abusing, muzzling and minimizing the spiritual gifts of our sisters in Christ.

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## **Hang On! Don’t Let Delays Weaken Your Faith**

Here’s a trivia question: Which building project took the longest to complete? 1) The construction of the Pentagon, 2) the carving of Mount Rushmore, 3) the digging of the Panama Canal, 4) the building of the Empire State Building or 5) the carving and assembling of the Statue of Liberty.

The answer is No. 3. It took 31 years to dig the Panama Canal, mainly because that superhuman task was started and stopped several times due to floods, mudslides, unexpected costs (the total bill for the United States was \$375 million in 1914) and a horrific death toll (20,000 French workers and 6,000 Americans died on the job site.) The moral of that story: Expect delays when you cut a 50-mile-long canal to connect two oceans.

I'm not attempting to move millions of tons of earth to make room for cargo ships. My ministry assignment is different. But I still feel overwhelmed at times by the task.

God calls each of us to join Him in His work, but accomplishing anything spiritual—such as building a church, engaging in missions work or influencing secular culture for Christ—is impossible in human terms. We can't accomplish anything for God without faith.

God gives us a promise—that's the easy part. Then He reveals His strategies, works miracles and sends provision. Working with God is exhilarating when these things happen.

But faith is also warfare. The devil hurls doubts and obstacles in our direction. There are battles and, sometimes, casualties. And there are always, always delays. And it is in those painful times of waiting when we are most tempted to quit.

The Bible is full of stories of men and women who waited and waited for God's promises to be fulfilled. Abraham and Sarah waited 25 years for Isaac's birth. Hannah endured years of barrenness waiting for her baby. David spent years in the wilderness before he became king.

Zerubbabel and Joshua, the two men commissioned to rebuild Solomon's temple, struggled with intense discouragement as they looked at Jerusalem's ruins. The task was overwhelming, the cost was prohibitive, the workers were dismayed and their

enemies were fierce.

They started the work in earnest, but they heard a familiar voice that whispered: "You'll never finish this. God is going to abandon you in the middle of this project."

Fortunately, just when Zerubbabel and Joshua were about to throw in the towel, the prophet Haggai showed up with a refreshing announcement. He told them: "'But now take courage ... and work; for I am with you,' declares the Lord" (Hag. 2:4, NASB).

The Lord also promised He would see the building project to completion. He said: "The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former ... and in this place I will give peace" (v. 9).

Those prophetic promises propelled Zerubbabel and Joshua forward. The words invigorated their weary faith and steeled their determination. Their passion was refueled. Their hands grew strong again and they returned to the work. God's glorious house arose from an ash heap.

This is God's promise to all who are called to labor with Him. He doesn't tell you to begin something and then leave you halfway through it. God is a wise builder and an expert craftsman. He is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. He finishes what He starts.

The apostle Paul knew this when he wrote: "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6, MEV). The Message Bible says it this way: "There has never been the slightest doubt in my mind that the God who started this great work in you would keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish on the very day Christ Jesus appears."

Many of God's servants today are weary. Budgets are tight, resistance is strong and people seem distracted and

disunified. The devil is busy trying to abort God's promises. You may have been tempted even this week to resign from your assignment. But I want to encourage you with the words of Haggai: "Take courage! The Lord is with you!"

Regardless of what you lack, the Lord's mighty presence is all you need to finish the task. Hang on to Him and keep believing.

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## **Do People Who Commit Suicide Go to Heaven?**

Last month, a successful young pastor, Andrew Stoecklein, ended his life at age 30 after suffering from months of depression. He left behind a grieving wife, three young sons and a baffled congregation in Chino, California.

Just days before his suicide, Stoecklein preached a sermon at Inland Hills Church about the reality of depression among Christians. He used the prophet Elijah's life to illustrate that even spiritual giants struggle with mental and emotional brokenness.

Stoecklein said in his Aug. 12 message that "we see mental illness on display" when Elijah hid in a cave and prayed that God would take his life. "Elijah, he pinpoints the pain," the young pastor said. "He acknowledges that he is filled with anxiety and depression and suicidal thoughts. ... Now that is something that we don't like to talk about much, do we? Especially not the church."

Stoecklein identified with Elijah's weakness more than anyone realized. He suffered crippling panic attacks after his father

died of cancer, and the leaders of his church insisted that he take a sabbatical because of his depression and anxiety. Yet no one, including his supportive wife, Kayla, had any clue he would end his life.

What's ironic is that Stoecklein's funeral was held just two days before National Suicide Prevention Day—which was instituted to raise awareness of mental illness in America.

The saddest aspect of this tragedy is how some Christians view suicide. Because we don't talk about it enough, the church often is silent when it happens—or we give really bad advice to those affected by it.

The truth is that suicide is discussed in the Bible. Saul intentionally fell on his own sword, Samson pulled the temple down on himself, Ahitophel strangled himself and Judas hung himself. And the apostle Paul told the Corinthians that his trials were so difficult that he “despaired even of life” (2 Cor. 1:8c).

Here are three clear principles we must teach as we examine this neglected topic:

1. **Suicide is not the unpardonable sin.** I have been around legalistic Christians who insist that a person who kills himself automatically goes to hell. They base this belief on a narrow interpretation of 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 (NASB), which says, “If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him.”

If you dig deeper in that passage, and look ahead to the fifth and sixth chapters, you'll see that Paul is not talking about suicide. He makes these comments about “destroying the temple of God” as he instructs the Corinthian church in how deal with an unrepentant, immoral person. In chapter 6 he reminds the church that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and that they should not be defiled by immoral behavior.

Others have tried to define suicide as an “unforgiveable” sin. They say this because a person who kills himself cannot repent afterwards. But Jesus was clear that there is really only one unpardonable sin—and that is total rejection of Christ as Savior by blaspheming the Holy Spirit (see Luke 12:10).

Because God’s mercy and grace are so big, even the sin of suicide can be forgiven. The redeeming power of the blood of Christ is so vast that it can cover not only past and present sins but future sins as well. Romans 8:38-39 (MEV) says it clearly: “For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities nor powers, neither things present nor things to come, neither height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

- 2. You can’t take the blame for someone else’s suicide.** So many questions follow a suicide—especially among the victim’s closest family members and friends. Why didn’t we see this coming? Could we have done anything to stop this? Is it our fault? Those questions are normal—but the answer is no. You can’t blame yourself for anyone’s decision to end his or her life.

We live in a fallen world. Until Jesus returns in ultimate triumph over the grave, we will still have to deal with mental anguish, chronic depression, anxiety disorders, panic attacks and a myriad of other struggles. While the Holy Spirit certainly can give us the power to overcome these challenges, we will not know total freedom until we get to the other side of eternity. And if someone we love commits suicide, the Holy Spirit will give us the supernatural comfort we need to handle the pain and disappointment.

- 3. The church should be a safe place for people with mental illness.** We should never make a fellow believer feel “less than a Christian” just because they struggle with emotional trauma or mental illness. Many believers are

afraid to ask for help because they've been told depression reveals a "lack of faith." So they suffer silently. Then, if they slip over the edge and kill themselves, everyone is surprised.

Pastor Andrew Stoeklein's wife, Kayla, gave some solid advice when she spoke at his funeral last week. "If you are struggling, tell somebody," she said. "The enemy wants you to feel isolated, unloved and worthless. I'm here to tell you that you are loved and valued more than you will ever know."

If you are depressed, struggling with an anxiety disorder or thinking of self-harm, the best thing to do is seek help immediately. Don't throw away your life. Don't listen to Satan's lies. God has a way out of your despair, but you can't find it alone. Open your heart, be honest, reach out to mature friends and talk to a pastor or counselor. Run into your heavenly Father's arms and discover His healing.

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## **Africa's Women Are Breaking Their Silence**

In Iringa, Tanzania, where I spent this past week, most women have never heard of the #MeToo movement. Many women here are illiterate because school isn't considered necessary for girls. And women who can read don't spend much time on social media following reports about famous American movie stars who were abused by Hollywood producers.

But Africa is ripe for its own version of #MeToo. So many of the women I met in Tanzania, and in the neighboring country of Malawi, shared painful stories of abuse, harassment, rape and forced marriage.

For the first time, some of them are willing to speak about it publicly.

One brave woman told her story in a conference last weekend at Bethel Life Church, a Pentecostal congregation in Iringa. She shared how a married man more than twice her age began harassing her. He dangled promises of money to tempt her. She felt intimidated because he held an important position in the government, so she reluctantly gave into his advances.

When she found out she was pregnant, he refused to admit the baby was his—and he took no financial responsibility. The man is an elder in a local congregation in Iringa.

During the last few days, I've met so many women with similar stories. One girl went to the Tanzanian island of Zanzibar to work in a hotel. But her dreams of a better life were shattered when her employer raped her. She got pregnant and had her baby at age 15. Several other women told me they were raped as young as 14, and now they care for their children with no help from the men who took advantage of them.

A woman from Mbeya, in the south, told me how her husband—and the father of her two daughters—abandoned her and then sold their house without her knowledge. A woman from Arusha, in northern Tanzania, pleaded with me to help the women from the nomadic Masai tribe. She said parents are selling their young daughters to older Masai men just to get the dowry payments.

I hear the stories everywhere I go in Africa, where the abuse of women has many forms: domestic violence, the cruel treatment of widows, forced prostitution, rape by soldiers, the degradation of polygamy, the sexual abuse of housemaids or the horrific practice of female genital mutilation.

At one point during our conference in Tanzania, dozens of women streamed to the front of the auditorium to receive prayer for abuse or abandonment. Two of the women began to scream and writhe on the floor, obviously tormented by demons.

Pastor Berrings Mlambya said both women had experienced traumatic sexual abuse, and the man who abused the second woman was deeply involved in witchcraft.

“The majority of women here have been abused, and this often opens them up to demonic problems,” Mlambya said. “Yet few pastors here are prepared to deal with this problem because they are so bound by African traditions. Our culture has told women that they must stay in their place.”

Pastor Mlambya, who moved to Iringa from the city of Mbeya in 2014, has opened a shelter to care for abused and abandoned women here. He provides a room, meals and basic job training for 11 single mothers. He also plans to instruct pastors in his Pentecostal Holiness denomination in how to confront cultural traditions that oppress women.

“If God does not help us, the change will be difficult,” Mlambya said.

Africa should be ground zero for the #MeToo movement, but women here don't have the platform to speak out like women in Western nations. Abuse is rampant but African women are expected to protect the status quo. So they suffer quietly. While abuse is discussed openly in the United States, Africa's crisis remains hidden behind a smokescreen of shame and cultural taboos.

Yet I'm encouraged because I see God breaking through the darkness. In our conference in Tanzania last Saturday night, male pastors from several churches gathered on the platform and knelt in front of the women. Before anyone could say anything, the women begin to wail. They had never seen men humble themselves and apologize for anything, especially sexual abuse.

As Pastor Mlambya prayed in Swahili, repenting on behalf of the husbands, fathers, uncles, boyfriends and bosses who abused these women, a wave of healing flowed through the

church.

I expect this miracle to be repeated all across the African continent in my lifetime. As the Holy Spirit brings His freedom, the silence will be broken, and women who have been shrouded in shame will finally make their voices heard.

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## **The Missing Ingredient in True Apostolic Anointing**

A few years ago, I heard a preacher tell a roomful of ministers that they couldn't work miracles or exercise apostolic authority unless they used the word "apostle" as a title. So some of them ran out and printed new business cards—as if putting the word in front of their names were the magic ticket to reclaiming New Testament power.

That was a bad idea. For the past two decades or more, thousands of people have been wounded and countless churches have nosedived because immature leaders thought they could gain apostolic status the easy way. We are so eager to qualify ourselves that we forget God alone calls, prepares and sends true apostles.

The late Arthur Katz, who was a prophetic voice to our movement for many years, wrote in his 1999 book, *Apostolic Foundations*, that nobody should be eager to step into an apostolic assignment or to treat such a task flippantly.

"God is jealous over the word apostolic," Katz wrote. "It is a word that has fallen into disuse and needs to be restored, and that restoration is not going to be cheap."

We charismatics tend to be so power hungry and so enamored with status and position that we don't have a clue what apostolic ministry really is. Most charismatics think it is about authority, and many people who claim to be apostles build top-down pyramid structures that abuse people. Others think apostolic leaders are marked primarily by sensational miracles.

Yet I see something we have entirely missed when I look at the life of Paul the apostle.

Paul told the Thessalonians that love is the true hallmark of any person who is sent on an apostolic mission. Therefore, if we want apostolic power or authority (which we should), it must flow through apostolic love or it is a counterfeit. This apostolic love can be described in four ways:

**1. It is incarnational.** Paul brought the gospel to the Thessalonians and lived among them. He did not just drop in, preach a good sermon and leave. He said, "We were willing to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives" (1 Thess. 2:8b).

Just as Jesus came to this earth, lived among us and died for us, true apostles give it all. If all an "apostle" does is preach a good message, he is a poor substitute for the real thing. (And if he also spends more time taking up offerings for himself, he is a hireling or a con artist.)

**2. It is sacrificial.** Paul risked his neck in Thessalonica, and then he told his followers that he would "suffer affliction" from his persecutors (1 Thess. 3:4, NASB). But he loved them so much that he prayed for them continually, and he longed to visit them again even though he knew it would be risky.

Paul never mentions money. In fact, when he was with the Thessalonian church, he worked night and day "so as not to be a burden to any of [them]" (1 Thess. 2:9). That flies in the

face of modern American apostles who charge \$1,000 an hour for their consulting fees.

**3. It is relational.** The word “brethren” appears in 1 Thessalonians 17 times. That’s because Paul viewed the church as the family of God. He saw himself in the role of a gentle, nursing mother (1 Thess. 2:7) as well as a strong father (v. 11).

Paul’s affection is so thick and so slobbery that it drips off the page of his letter. He says the members of the church “have become very dear” to them (v. 8) and that they “also long to see [them]” (3:6). It’s no surprise that he ends the epistle by exhorting the people to greet one another with “a holy kiss” (5:26).

What has happened to this kind of holy affection in today’s church? Why are we so disconnected? We have replaced deep relationships with cold professionalism.

Many church leaders today have not been properly fathered, so they don’t know how to love—nor do they have close friends. So we cover our dysfunction with busyness. We work, work, work—while sterile, loveless congregations struggle to grow. We use gimmicks and programs to get people in seats because our love is not warm enough to create an actual living community.

**4. It is confrontational.** Paul was not seeker-sensitive. He didn’t hesitate to confront sin. He gave the Thessalonians one of the most frank, forthright sermons on sexual sin ever written (1 Thess. 4:1-8). But he confronted them as a loving father by imploring them to stay within their God-given boundaries.

Paul didn’t use anger, manipulation, domination or threats. He led with strong, apostolic love. We need that kind of leadership today.

I believe God wants to pour out a new wave of apostolic power on our generation. But we can't be trusted with this anointing if we refuse to grow up. We will have the right to use the word "apostolic" when we learn to walk in the love that was modeled by the first apostles. {eoa}

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## **4 Ways to Determine a Counterfeit Apostolic Love**

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**Lee Grady** was editor of Charisma for 17 years and now serves as contributing editor. He directs The Mordecai Project ([themorecaiproject.org](http://themorecaiproject.org)), an international ministry that protects women from gender-based violence. His latest book is Set My Heart on Fire (Charisma House).

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