

Stop Worrying About Crowd Size—Just Be Faithful

There's nothing more disheartening to a preacher than to see empty seats in a church. I'll be honest—I like meetings where you have to pull out extra chairs and put people in the aisles. Why? Because I assume if God's blessing is on a meeting it will be packed. I like numbers because, in my carnal thinking, crowds are more significant.

Our culture puts value on things depending on how popular they are, and we are guilty of applying this rule in the church. We like big. We even rate the effectiveness of churches based on size.

According to *Outreach Magazine's* 2017 report, the largest churches in the United States are 1) Church of the Highlands in Birmingham, Alabama; 2) Andy Stanley's North Point Ministries in Atlanta and 3) Gateway Church in the Dallas area. These are incredible, Bible-based churches with impressive outreaches to their communities.

Other churches in the Top 10 List include Elevation Church in Charlotte, North Carolina; Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago and Rick Warren's Saddleback Community Church in Southern California. Every pastor would love to have a congregation of 40,000 like Church of the Highlands. And many pastors I know feel like failures because they've never broken through the 200 mark.

But we need to remember that God doesn't evaluate us based on numbers, nor does He rate our effectiveness by comparing us to someone else. God's ways are not our ways! We must remember these kingdom principles:

1. **Less is sometimes more.** Jesus attracted big crowds, but the numbers didn't impress Him because He knew many who

were healed in His meetings wouldn't follow Him to the cross. He even told one of His crowds that the gospel seeds He was sowing would be eaten by birds, scorched and withered or choked by thorns (see Mark 4:3-8). Only a small percentage, He said, would bear fruit. Jesus was looking for quality, not quantity.

In the end, after thousands heard Jesus' messages and ate His free lunches, only 120 of His followers gathered in the upper room on the day of Pentecost. That is not an impressive number, and today's church growth specialists might say Jesus failed to break the 200 barrier within three years of ministry!

2. **We must follow the cloud, not the crowd.** There are a few crowd shots in the book of Acts. But most scenes of the early church are less impressive. An Ethiopian was converted on a desert road. The Holy Spirit fell on members of an Italian family gathered in a home in Caesarea. A woman named Lydia came to Christ at a small prayer gathering by a river in Philippi, becoming the first convert in Europe.

Why are these seemingly inconsequential stories highlighted in Scripture? Because God moves as powerfully in one-on-one conversations and small group gatherings as He does in big meetings. When we follow the cloud of His presence, He often leads us to the one instead of the many.

The book of Acts ends with a scene of Paul ministering quietly to people in a small apartment while he is under house arrest (see Acts 28:30-31). Paul certainly didn't measure His impact by large buildings, big mailing lists, media exposure or book sales. Paul never led a megachurch. And His writings didn't become popular until he was dead.

3. **Make disciples, don't entertain audiences.** Every man's work will be tested by fire, and every ministry will be

evaluated not by church-growth experts but by God's holy standards. Sitting in a church does not make a person a faithful follower of Jesus. Don't confuse disciples with pew-warmers. He will not evaluate us by how many people sat in chairs. His chief concern is how many disciples we made.

4. **Stop trying to be popular.** The largest gathering in human history is believed to be the Kumbh Mela pilgrimage, a Hindu festival held in India in 2013. The largest concert ever held is believed to be rocker Rod Stewart's beachside concert in Rio de Janeiro in 1995. Did either of those gatherings change your life? Probably not.

Let's stop evaluating our own effectiveness—and each other's—by crowd size or popularity. If you are a leader, be faithful with the people you have, whether it is a home church of seven, a campus Bible study of 10, a rural congregation of 30 or a megachurch of 2,000. Whether you are ministering to a handful of inmates, a roomful of Alzheimer's patients, a dozen orphans or one depressed friend, forget your need for the spotlight.

Jesus gave us a refreshingly different perspective on crowd size. He told His disciples: "For where two or three are assembled in My name, there I am in their midst" (Matt. 18:20). If He loves small gatherings, why should we despise them?

Learn to be faithful with what God gives you. Don't focus on numbers. Just make Jesus popular.

President Trump, Racism and the Immigration Debate

For the past week, journalists and politicians have been consumed with one question: Did President Trump use vulgar, racist language to describe Haiti and nations in Africa?

We may never know exactly what words Trump used during that meeting with lawmakers in Washington on Jan. 11. The president allegedly called a group of poor nations “[expletive] countries” during a discussion about DACA, a program that protects the children of illegal immigrants.

When news of Trump’s alleged comment spread, Republican senator Lindsey Graham told reporters he definitely heard Trump say the offending word. Senators Tom Cotton of Arkansas and David Perdue of Georgia denied that Trump said it. Illinois Democrat Dick Durbin insisted otherwise, and called the comment “hate-filled, vile and racist.”

In his defense, Trump tweeted: “The language used by me at the DACA meeting was tough, but this was not the language used.” But an international outcry followed. Ambassadors and presidents denounced the word as insensitive and degrading. Trump took a beating, and our nation became even more polarized.

Many Christians have rushed to President Trump’s defense, saying they are sure he didn’t say the word. Others seem ready to condemn Trump whether he said it or not.

My main concern in this debate is not whether the leader of the free world uttered a word I can’t use in this magazine. I can’t prove whether the president said it. But even if he didn’t, he did acknowledge what he was trying to communicate in the DACA meeting. He was asking the senators: “Why would we allow immigrants to come to our country if they are from

troubled, dysfunctional nations? Why should we give citizenship to people who will end up being a drag on our system?"

It's a fair question. And it raises the most important point in the immigration debate. Should the United States close our doors to certain countries just because they are poor, or because they have social or economic problems?

Many leaders in today's conservative political movement say yes. They believe we would spare the United States a lot of grief if we allowed more immigrants from, say, Norway (Trump suggested this in the DACA meeting)—since Norwegians supposedly wouldn't bring any problems with them.

But that position in itself is selfish, cold-hearted and racist, whether any racist slurs or vulgar terms are attached. And it is 100 percent opposite to the values of Christianity—which calls us to love foreigners and to show compassion to the poor.

Many Christians say they support President Trump not because he always exhibits Christian character (he is certainly not a pastor) or because his speech is G-rated (we have examples to prove it isn't) but because he stands for biblical policies. But in this case, I can't be a faithful prophetic voice for God if I don't wave a red flag and question President Trump's ideals.

Having a closed-door policy toward poor foreigners is blatantly anti-Christian. So is showing favoritism toward the privileged. Let's remember the principle of compassion that is so clearly outlined in Scripture:

Deuteronomy 10:19 says: "Therefore, love the foreigner, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt." We should love others less fortunate than us because we were once in their shoes. Americans, of all people, should understand this—because we are a nation of immigrants. It was only a few

generations ago when immigrants from Italy, Ireland and Poland were treated shamefully in this country. Today, the suspicion is aimed at those with darker skin or Muslim backgrounds. We should love them regardless.

Leviticus 19:34a says: “The foreigner who dwells with you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” Notice, God did not provide a list of “approved” nations that should be protected by Israel. He simply said “the stranger.” God does not make a differentiation between “good nations” and “[expletive] countries.” He tells us to love them all.

Jesus Himself said in Matthew 25:35: “For I was hungry, and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me drink, I was a stranger and you took Me in.” We can defend our protectionist immigration policies in the name of “security,” but Jesus will have the last word when He asks us what we did with the people He wanted to send to us to protect. On the day of Christ’s return, we will not be allowed to make lame excuses, such as, “But Lord, those people are filthy, and we didn’t want them to drag down the economy.”

Our compassionate immigration policy is the reason the United States is a blessed nation. We have been a welcoming people. Our own Statue of Liberty is a sign to the world that we have, at least in the past, invited strangers to find freedom and opportunity within our borders—whether they were fleeing war, disasters, religious repression, violence or hunger.

How dare we tell Jesus that we don’t want “those people” to become our neighbors. This whole world was a filthy, forsaken place when Jesus left heaven to come here and save us. Compassion for the poor is at the heart of the gospel. Please don’t let your politics turn your heart cold.

How Some Christians Become the Devil's Minions

A friend of mine who pastors a growing church recently got a visit from a worried church member who said she had an important message from the Lord for him. When they met, the woman began to warn him about another woman in the church who, she claimed, was going to tear the church apart.

The pastor listened carefully and then asked a few questions. Had the woman in question said something derogatory to reveal her alleged evil intentions? What was she doing to tear the church apart? Was there proof? After all, the woman being accused was a supportive volunteer who seemed to get along with everyone.

The woman with the “word from the Lord” got defensive and said she knew she was right because she had “a gift of discernment.” She didn’t need to corroborate her story or provide concrete evidence. She just “knew.”

When the woman bringing this accusation was told she was out of bounds, she left the meeting in a huff—and then left the church because her super-spiritual insight was not received.

In this case, the woman who claimed to have a hotline to God did not have “discernment”—she was exhibiting a spirit of accusation. She had what I jokingly refer to as “the gift of suspicion.” Ironically, she is the one who is guilty of tearing the church apart.

Why do Christians treat each other like this? Why do we hurl unfounded accusations at others and then hide our malice under a robe of self-righteousness? If the devil went on a vacation

for a month, I guess some Christians would gladly do his work while he's away.

It would be a good idea, as we start this new year, to review the basic rules about gossip:

1. **Remember that the devil is the accuser.** Satan is called "the accuser of our brethren" in Revelation 12:10, and he hurls his accusations at us "night and day." So it shouldn't be surprising that sometimes we hear his accusations about others, and he tempts us to repeat them. If our hearts aren't full of the love of God we will toss the devil's grenades for him.

Do you honestly want to be on Satan's side in spiritual warfare? You are fighting for his team when you spread negativity about others—even if your hateful indictments are cloaked in "God told me this while I was praying" smugness. Never align yourself with the accuser. Make sure your heart is free from unforgiveness, jealousy and hatred so you don't end up being a minion of the devil.

2. **Never repeat something negative you've heard about someone unless you know it's true.** There's a reason we call gossip "juicy." We like to hear negative things about others because it makes us feel better about ourselves. It feeds our flesh. Proverbs 26:22, in The Passion Translation, says: "Gossip is so delicious, and how we love to swallow it! For slander is easily absorbed into our innermost being."

Gossip tastes sweet, but it will make you bitter. You don't have to listen to it, and you certainly don't have to repeat it. Turn a deaf ear to negative talk. Walk away from the water cooler when the conversation gets ugly. Tell gossipers you won't listen to their toxic talk.

If you have God's love in your heart, you won't slander another person. Love covers negativity with mercy and

kindness. Proverbs 17:9 (MEV) says: “He who covers a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates friends.”

This doesn't mean we don't confront sin. But if someone has wronged you, you should go to them privately and discuss it. Don't tell 12 people what happened so you can organize a jury. And don't post your experience on social media so you can gather sympathizers.

- 3. When you hear something negative about someone, pray rather than prey.** James 4:11a (NIV) says: “Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another.” The word “slander,” *katalaleō* in the Greek, means, “to speak badly about someone so as to damage their reputation.” Spreading gossip about people is character assassination.

How do we respond to the temptation to gossip? The best way is to pray. One of my favorite authors of the last century, Leonard Ravenhill, wrote: “We never pray for folks we gossip about, and we never gossip about the folk for whom we pray.”

Prayer will supernaturally guard your heart from the seeds of hate that are hidden in a juicy morsel of gossip or a false accusation. Prayer will adjust your attitude, fill your soul with forgiveness and make sure that Satan, the ultimate accuser, has no foothold in your life. In 2018, make it your goal to always use your words to build people up, not tear them down.

Set Your 'Spiritual GPS' for the New Year

At the beginning of every New Year I always reassess my goals, sharpen my objectives and pray for God's blessing. I ask myself: What do I want God to accomplish in my life this year? How do I want to grow personally, in my relationships and in my career? Then I seek the Lord to hear what He is saying to me about the next 12 months.

I call this exercise "resetting my GPS." I encourage you to try it. Here's how it works:

G stands for "Goals." People with goals have a sense of purpose, and they aren't easily distracted. On the other hand, those with no ambitions wander aimlessly. If you aim at nothing, you will surely hit it. Setting a goal is the first step toward success.

I see the power of goal setting in the life of the apostle Paul. He was motivated by a fiery passion to take the gospel to the Gentiles. In his lifetime he traveled on foot or by ship, chariot or horseback to what is now Turkey, Syria, Greece, Crete, Malta and Italy. His goal drove him forward.

He also set a goal to preach in Spain (see Rom. 15:24, 28). We don't know if he reached Spain or not, but that goal certainly stoked his zeal and motivated him to wake up every morning. When he wrote these words—"I press toward the goal to the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14)—he was in chains in a Roman prison. Paul didn't let obstacles deter him.

There's a difference between a dream and a goal. Dreams can be elusive—always "somewhere out there"—if the person dreaming never takes a first step. Your most vital step is to write down your goal. State it clearly and aim at it. The prophet

said in Habakkuk 2:2: "Write the vision, and make it plain on tablets, that he who reads it may run." You can't run toward your vision unless it is clearly articulated.

P stands for "Prophetic Word." For many years I've developed the habit of seeking the Lord for a word for the coming year. Sometimes God gives me a verse from the Bible. Other times I get a phrase or simply one word. As I was praying for 2018, for example, the Lord said, "Advance" and "Take possession," and He gave me Joshua 1. He also encouraged me to study the book of Joshua during 2018.

You don't have to be a prophet to receive a personalized directive like this. God knows you, and He knows your future. He also knows the challenges you face and the storms that may come this year. Jeremiah 29:11 says: "For I know the plans that I have for you, says the Lord, plans for peace and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." God loves you. If you seek Him, He will speak a word to your heart.

Once you receive that prophetic word, hold onto it no matter what happens. God gave Abraham and Sarah a promise about an heir, but it took 25 years before Isaac was born. God does not work according to your timetable; you must submit to His schedule. The prophetic word is certain; you can bank on it. It will fill your heart with the hope and encouragement you need to move forward, in spite of delays, setbacks, personal failures, relationship breakups, illness, job loss, miscarriages, deaths or disasters.

S stands for "Special Prayer." The most important part of resetting my spiritual GPS is setting aside time to pray. I call it "special" prayer because it's beyond the norm of my daily routine. I feel most prepared for a New Year if I can unplug and devote a block of time to commit my plans and goals to the Lord.

Setting goals is a great step toward success, but goals are

nothing if God did not inspire them. Proverbs 16:9 says: “A man’s heart devises his way, but the Lord directs his steps.” When we take our goals to God in prayer, we allow Him to override them if they are misguided; we also give Him permission to expand our goals if they are limited. We bow before God’s throne and tell Him that we only want His plans, not ours.

Proverbs 16:3 says: “Commit your works to the Lord, and your thoughts will be established.” You can facilitate special prayer in several ways. You may want to fast for a few days; you might go away for a weekend prayer retreat; or you could stay up a few nights and have a prayer vigil. Some churches also organize special days of corporate prayer at the beginning of the year.

You don’t have to adopt the same prayer routine every year. The important thing is to take your plans to God and ask for His grace, power and strength to overshadow you during the next season. Ask for big things. Seek God’s wisdom and strategy. Knock on heaven’s door for His miracles.

Expect God to speak to your heart. He will reveal His plans, rekindle your dreams, calm your fears and stir your faith so you can experience your best year ever.

7 Ways to Recharge Your Prayer Life in 2018

I look forward to the beginning of each year because I set aside some days for special prayer. I don’t like to finish one year and start another without taking time to thank Jesus for the ways He blessed me during the past 12 months and to ask

Him for supernatural strength for the next season.

For me, these days of prayer offer a holy recharge. Without that time I feel weak, directionless and unprepared for new challenges.

What about you? Are your spiritual batteries drained from the battles of 2017? The Holy Spirit offers a jumpstart. Here are seven ways you can turn up the heat in your personal prayer life:

Develop your spiritual confidence. Many Christians live on the far edges of God's blessings because they don't believe they have been made righteous by Christ's sacrifice. You will never expect answers from God if you think He's mad at you.

Don't act like a slave who begs for things. You are His heir, and He wants to give you the kingdom. God tells us to "draw near *with confidence* to the throne of grace" (Heb. 4:16, NASB). You can ask Him for anything.

Be specific. Zig Ziglar used to say: "If you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time." That's why vague prayers are inferior to specific ones. I have recently begun the habit of making a "Top Seven List" of prayer requests. When I did this during an out-of-state move last year, the Lord answered six of my seven requests within two months.

One of my prayers was that when I bought my new house, my new house payment would not be more than my old one. It turned out to be one dollar less! I was reminded that James 4:2 says: "You do not have because you do not ask."

Don't limit God with small prayers. Psalm 2:8 says: "Ask of Me, and I will give the nations for Your inheritance." We need to learn to ask big. Why would we settle for less when God can do the impossible?

Elisha boldly asked his mentor, Elijah, for a double portion

of the Holy Spirit—and God gave him that mantle. God may want to double what you are requesting of Him. His vision for your life is far greater than what you supposed.

Be aggressive against your spiritual enemies. Status quo prayers won't be enough in seasons of spiritual battle. There is a time to go to war in the spirit, and this will require a militant attitude toward the enemy.

When Elisha told King Joash to take arrows and strike the ground, in preparation for a battle, the king halfheartedly hit the ground only three times. Elisha said: "You should have struck five or six times, then you would have struck Aram until you would have destroyed it" (2 Kings 13:18-19). Too often we are satisfied with small victories because we didn't pray with enough intensity. Your zeal will often determine your outcome.

Combine fasting with prayer. Fasting is not a way to bribe God. You do not need to forfeit food to get His attention. But fasting helps you focus on the Lord—and it can intensify prayer power.

There are certain spiritual obstacles that need an extra push. When speaking of a demon that needed to be cast out, Jesus told His disciples: "But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting" (Matt. 17:21). If you are hitting a spiritual brick wall, it may be time to fast.

Pull an all-nighter. I am not the kind of guy who typically gets up at 3 a.m. to pray. I like my sleep! But there are moments in our lives when the Lord may woo you to spend time with Him in the night hours.

In Song of Solomon, the bride hears her Beloved calling her to get out of bed (5:2-6) and she doesn't respond quickly enough. Many of us are too distracted by the busyness of life to hear God call us to a season of prayer. Yet the Lord is looking for people who will carry His burdens. Will you let Him pray

through you?

Let God amplify your feeble prayers. I used to fight discouragement about my prayer life because I didn't feel my prayers were powerful enough. But then I read Ephesians 3:20 in a new light. It says God is able "to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think" (Eph. 3:20). That means after I pray, God adds His own miraculous ingredient.

My prayers may seem feeble and flawed, but He is able to amplify them.

Like the tiny lunch of five loaves and two fish, Jesus can take something insignificant and feed a multitude. When you pray, expect Him to increase the impact. What you whisper in your closet can shake the world. Let God recharge your prayer life in 2018.

God's Biggest Promises Take Time

Most Christmas movies or pageants focus on the principal characters of the nativity story—the innocent Mary, the bewildered Joseph, the awestruck shepherds and a sleeping baby Jesus. Then we throw in the non-biblical extras, like the cartoon donkey named Bo in the new movie *The Star*, which tells the story of Jesus' birth from the animals' point of view.

But I've yet to see a play or a film of the Christmas story that focuses on Simeon and Anna, the two Jewish intercessors who prophesied over Jesus a few days after His birth. That's the movie I want to see.

This Christmas I'm thinking more about Simeon and Anna—not because I've reached their age bracket but because Christmas is not really a story about mangers, donkeys and angels. Ultimately it is a story about how God fulfills His promises—even when those promised answers take a long time.

While most of Israel was clueless about God's plan of salvation and angry about the Roman occupation of Jerusalem, Simeon knew Jesus was coming—and the Holy Spirit told him he wouldn't die until he saw the Messiah. When Mary and Joseph brought the infant Jesus to the temple to be dedicated, Simeon took the boy in his arms and declared that He was the “light for revelation to the Gentiles” (Luke 2:32).

Then Anna walked into the scene. An 84-year-old widow, she had been praying and fasting continually in the temple, asking God to send the Savior. She had sought God for years for the promised Savior. I am sure she was weary of waiting. Yet, like Simeon, she immediately recognized Jesus as the answer to her prayers and began telling everyone that their long wait was over.

Luke 2:38 says that when Anna saw the baby, “she gave thanks to the Lord and spoke of Him to all those who looked for the redemption of Israel.”

It was a scene of jubilation. I imagine both Simeon and Anna held their hands in the air and perhaps even shouted as they welcomed the fulfillment of ancient prophecies. But what we don't see in this happy scene are the decades of painful groaning that these old saints endured.

The joyful moment of Jesus' birth did not come without a price.

God's promises, like the birth of children, require a gestation period—an agonizing season of waiting. Most people in the Bible who claimed big promises did not get instant, microwave answers. Like the childless Hannah, the heirless

Abraham or the imprisoned apostle Paul, they travailed. And waited. And travailed some more.

In the animal kingdom, big creatures often have the longest gestation periods. A baby whale grows in his mother's womb for 18 months, and a baby giraffe waits 15 months. Some species of elephants are pregnant for two years.

That tells me if I am carrying a big promise, I should be prepared to wait.

I should understand this uncomfortable process, since I watched my wife give birth to all four of our children. How quickly we forget that prayer is often compared with childbirth in the Bible. And in this tedious process, we must press through the darkness of doubt and lay hold of God's sure promise, especially when we feel like giving up.

Many of us right now are at the most intense stage of the birth process—the transition phase, in which a pregnant woman feels confused, irritable and restless. We endure similar feelings of desperation in our walk of faith. We ask ourselves, *Did God really promise me that?* Everything inside us wants to quit believing.

I am sure Simeon and Anna considered quitting during their years of prayer. The headlines in Jerusalem were depressing. The economy was awful. The political situation was demoralizing.

Yet these two faithful prayer warriors didn't go into retirement. They found the grace to press on. Though their hands grew feeble, their faith grew strong. They felt barren, but they shouted anyway.

Perhaps they read the promise of Isaiah 62:1: "For the sake of Zion I will not keep silent, and for the sake of Jerusalem I will not rest until her righteousness goes forth as brightness and her salvation as a lamp that burns."

They did not let the flame of prayer go out. They persevered. And finally, their groaning paid off—and they had something to shout about. They not only witnessed the Christmas miracle; they also got to hold the baby Jesus in their arms.

This Christmas, I pray the faith of Simeon and Anna will inspire you to hold tightly to all God has promised you. The promise came from Him. He is working quietly behind the scenes. Don't stop believing.

Christianity and the Message of 'Star Wars'

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away (well, actually it was 40 years ago in a crowded theater in suburban Atlanta) I saw *Star Wars*. It was 1977. I was a 19-year-old college student. I was totally wowed.

The special effects mesmerized me. I loved the light sabers, the droids and Luke Skywalker's speeder bike. I laughed when Princess Leia said of Chewbacca, "Will someone get this big walking carpet out of my way?" I cheered when the good guys blew up the Death Star, and when the evil villain Darth Vader spun out of control in his TIE fighter into the depths of space—promising a sequel.

And there have been plenty of sequels and prequels since that first episode. Altogether the Star Wars movies have made \$37 billion. The film franchise's creator, George Lucas, sold the rights to the movies to Disney in 2012 for \$4 billion. And now Disney expects to make \$425 million in one weekend when the next installment, *The Last Jedi*, opens tomorrow.

When the first movie came out, some Christians immediately condemned it, claiming that George Lucas was a closet Hindu and that the movie was a satanic conspiracy aimed at planting New Age ideas into children's minds. Those same critics got louder after the release of the second film, *The Empire Strikes Back*, mainly because the green, cartoonish Yoda (sounds too much like "yoga") was a Krishna-esque guru who taught his padawan disciple, Luke, how to levitate objects with his thoughts.

But within a few years observers started noticing that *Star Wars* contained basic Christian themes such as the triumph of good over evil, the virtue of sacrifice and the power of redemption. That bad-to-good redemption angle was especially obvious in *The Return of the Jedi*, when Darth Vader turns against the devilish emperor to defend Luke, who refuses to convert to the dark side of the mysterious Force.

Many Christian authors have found faith inspiration in the *Star Wars* stories. They have produced books including *The Gospel According to Star Wars* (John C. McDowell), *Star Wars Jesus* (Caleb Grimes) and *Finding God in a Galaxy Far, Far Away* (Timothy Paul Jones). Writer Paul Kent even wrote a 40-day devotional, *The Real Force*, based on the movies.

But the question remains: Are the *Star Wars* movies good for us? Or are they dangerous? Or are they just harmless, escapist entertainment?

Maybe you won't trust me to answer that, since I plan to see *The Last Jedi*. I'm not one of those Christians who demonizes a film just because it isn't appropriate for Sunday school. I didn't shield my children from fairy tales, even if those stories contained magic ("Cinderella," "Pinocchio"), a witch (*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*) or a ghost (*A Christmas Carol*). In fact, I believe God can use creative fiction to teach and inspire us.

I like good stories. I especially love stories in which the underdog becomes a hero and fights for justice. I love stories in which the good guys win, the bad guys lose and the worst guy realizes he made a mistake and decides to change. I love stories that illustrate the values I want in my life, even if the setting is a fictional planet (like Alderaan or Tatooine) or a fictional town in Alabama (like Maycomb in my favorite novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*).

That is the appeal of all the Star Wars movies. They speak to us on a deep level about important themes like forgiveness, courage and virtue. They emphasize faith, hope and love.

Just because I like the Star Wars films doesn't mean I think they have correct theology. I don't believe the Force is the same thing as the God of the Bible (and yes, there are definite Hindu and Buddhist ideas thrown into the mix). But I do believe I can use the Star Wars story to help a person understand Christianity. That is the job of a wise evangelist—he can use a cultural reference, a myth, a pop song or a film to preach the gospel.

If the apostle Paul were around today, I suspect he would be at the Cineplex watching Star Wars—and collecting material for his next sermon. He tried to be relevant to his audience. He said, “I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22). He spoke the language of his culture without ever watering down his message or his morals.

Paul often used the popular poetry of his day to reach unbelievers. When he preached in Athens, he quoted two secular poets to describe God's vast purpose in a way that made sense to a pagan audience. He was quoting Epimenides when he said: “For in Him [God] we live and move and exist” (see Acts 17:28).

Our culture today is very much like first-century Athens. For

many people, *The Last Jedi* is the closest thing they have to religion. Let's be sensitive to those who are seeking the meaning of life even when they go to a movie. Start conversations. Share how Jesus has been the true "Force" in your life. Let the Holy Spirit use you to turn many people from the dark side.

The Virgin Birth Is Not Fake News

My wife and I have four daughters, and I was in the hospital room for each birth. There was a normal amount of blood, but no serious complications. Our oldest took forever to be born. Our second was in such a hurry that we thought she might end up on the floor of a hospital hallway. Our third tied her umbilical cord in knots in the womb. And our youngest calmly slipped out as if to say: "OK, I'm born. What's next?"

I had very little to do in the delivery room. My wife was the hero. She sweated, strained, pushed and gasped for hours. I stroked her arm a few times—and ate some doughnuts.

Normal births are amazing, whether they occur in hospitals or homes or the back seats of taxis. But when I consider the birth of Jesus, I'm in total awe—not just because of Mary and Joseph's bumpy ride from Nazareth, Mary's lack of a doctor (and anesthesia!) and the crudeness of the manger, but also because of how Jesus was conceived.

Mary was a virgin. Joseph, the "father," had nothing to do but stand in the background.

Secularists and liberal theologians have mocked the virgin

birth for centuries. Thomas Jefferson called it a fable, while Episcopal heretic John Shelby Spong called it an “entrance myth.” The concept of a woman giving birth to a baby without a man’s involvement is ludicrous to unbelievers. It contradicts all the laws of biology.

This Christmas season, the American Atheists organization has launched a billboard campaign to question whether the birth of Jesus actually happened. The signs feature a nativity scene with the statement: “Just skip church. It’s all fake news!”

But the Virgin Mary was not a scoffer. She asked the angel how she would bear this child, and he said: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (Luke 1:35a).

I would have asked for more scientific information. (“Um, thanks Gabe, but how does this process of miraculous impregnation work?”) But Mary didn’t quibble over details. She believed Gabriel’s announcement and submitted to God in childlike faith.

The Greek word for “overshadow,” *episkiazo*, is a reference to the cloud of God’s presence that materialized in Moses’ tabernacle. The Amplified Bible, Classic Edition, translates Luke 1:35 as: He “will overshadow you [like a shining cloud],” This same cloud hovered over the ark of the covenant, led God’s people through the wilderness and filled Solomon’s temple with shimmering *shekinah* glory.

Think about it. The same cloud of glory that caused Moses’ face to shine hovered over a virgin and deposited a divine seed in her womb. The God who hid behind a veil in the Old Testament clothed Himself in human flesh in the New Testament.

The Incarnation cannot be explained in purely biological terms. There was nothing sexual about it, yet Mary’s ovum was fertilized without Joseph’s sperm. Divinity merged with humanity. Jesus, fully God and fully man, began a nine-month

gestation.

When the Savior was born, there was a normal amount of blood, sweat and tears—because Mary was human. But this birth was surrounded with wonder because Joseph was not the real father. He came from a royal line of kings, but his pedigree was not enough to save the human race. He could not contribute to this miracle.

Doubters think Joseph got Mary pregnant out of wedlock. If that were true, Christianity itself would be a lie because (1) if Jesus were not born of a woman, He could not have identified with our sins fully; and (2) if God were not His biological father, He could not have redeemed us.

This is the most glorious revelation of the nativity. Bible teacher R.T. Kendall put it this way: “The virgin birth of Christ shows that salvation can never come through human effort.” God performed this science-defying miracle without our help. All we can do is receive His amazing love and forgiveness.

We just stand there in awe, beholding the glorious mystery of the Incarnation. As you prepare for this holiday season, ponder the miracle of the virgin birth. I pray you and your family will be overshadowed in a fresh way by the presence of the Savior.

**Jesus Christ, Al Franken and
the Scandal of Sexual**

Harassment

Allegations of sexual harassment pile higher every day in Washington. Senator Al Franken, the Democrat from Minnesota, has been accused of groping women, while Michigan congressman John Conyers has stepped down from the House Judiciary Committee because he paid \$27,000 to a woman who accused him of inappropriate sexual behavior. And a Texas congressman, Republican Joe Barton, is in the hot seat because he texted nude photos to a woman.

And then there's Roy Moore, the feisty Alabama judge who has been accused of having a sexual relationship with a woman when she was underage. When combined with the serious accusations against Hollywood movie mogul Harvey Weinstein, the Anthony Weiner fiasco, the Bill Cosby trial and the sexual harassment scandals affecting companies such as Uber, the impact is beyond embarrassing. We've been hit by a tsunami of shame.

The rug has been pulled back, and now we see the disgusting truth—American women have been mistreated, abused, coerced, disrespected, catcalled and harassed in offices, boardrooms, courtrooms, gyms, film studios and the chambers of the U.S. Senate.

At this point it's comforting to remember that Jesus Christ had a perfect track record regarding women. Though He lived in a patriarchal culture that viewed women as property, He always respected and elevated them—and He never once did anything inappropriate with a woman, ever, during His time on this earth.

While professing believers in Jesus are not always perfect in this regard, let's remember how Jesus treated women and make Him our example:

Jesus protected women from harassment. Women in ancient Israel could be accused of adultery even if they were simply caught

alone with a man. When the Pharisees brought one accused woman to Jesus, they said they had caught her “in the very act” of adultery (John 8:4), even though they conveniently forgot to bring the man she was with. Jesus refused to condemn her, and no stones were thrown. Jesus doesn’t tip the scales of justice to protect the powerful; He defends the vulnerable.

Jesus looked beyond a woman’s sexuality and restored her dignity. When a prostitute heard that Jesus was dining at a Pharisee’s house, she came there and poured anointing oil on His feet. The Pharisee was shocked that Jesus let her touch Him, but Jesus looked past her sin to see her need for forgiveness (Luke 7:36-50). Jesus never undressed a woman with His eyes, yet in total purity He could look inside her and see her heart’s yearning.

Jesus gave marginalized women a voice. Jewish rabbis in ancient Israel didn’t have female followers. Yet Jesus called several women to travel with Him, and they became some of his most loyal disciples (see Luke 8:1-3). Mary Magdalene, in fact, had the privilege of announcing His resurrection to Jesus’ male followers.

Jesus restored the equal value of women. When Jesus came to the house of Mary and Martha, He welcomed Mary to kneel at His feet and take the posture of a disciple—even though women traditionally were not allowed in such settings. When He told Martha that Mary had “chosen the good part” at His feet (Luke 10:42b), He issued an invitation—calling all women to find their identity in Him.

Jesus defended women from discrimination. Jesus went out of His way to speak to the Samaritan woman in John 4. She had been divorced by five husbands—perhaps because she was barren or because of her behavior. Yet Jesus canceled every mark on her record and used her to convince an entire village to believe in Him. In one day, He turned an outcast into a heroine.

Jesus redefined the worth of a girl. Girls were considered inferior in ancient Israel, yet when the 12-year-old daughter of Jairus died, Jesus raised her to life (Mark 5:21-24, 35-42; Luke 8:40-42, 49-56). That miracle reminds us that God doesn't devalue girls or ignore their problems.

Jesus acknowledged the contributions of women. When a poor widow put two coins worth very little in the collection box, Jesus shined His spotlight on her and told the Pharisees that her gift was bigger than theirs because of her poverty (see Luke 21:1-4). This would have been the verbal equivalent of cold water in the face to the proud Jewish leaders, who considered themselves superior to women. Yet Jesus is not afraid to confront heartless macho pride.

Jesus never used demeaning language with women. When Jesus healed a crippled woman in the synagogue, He called her to the front of the congregation (a definite taboo in those days) and then referred to her as "a daughter of Abraham" (Luke 13:16), an endearing term that no rabbi would have used for a female. Jesus changed the vocabulary. He didn't engage in demeaning locker-room talk about women—He esteemed them and gave them spiritual dignity.

Today, even men who occupy the highest offices in the land have proven to be sexual predators. It's obvious we need a new role model when it comes to how to treat women. I nominate Jesus.

How Africans Taught Me to Be

Thankful

I love Africa. I've made many trips there, and I just returned from 13 days of ministry in Kenya and Uganda. My friends in those countries would have loved to fly home with me. Some joked about hiding in my suitcase. To them, America is a land of limitless opportunity.

Yet when I return from a foreign trip, I notice many Americans don't appreciate how blessed we are. We gripe about our First-World problems. We are clueless about how most people live in the real world.

When I sit down to a big Thanksgiving meal this week, I'm going to thank God for the things I've taken for granted:

I am thankful for food. One pastor I met this week in Uganda said when he was growing up in his small village, "Breakfast was a miracle, lunch was a sign and a wonder and dinner was a breakthrough." Many Africans don't know where their next meal will come from. Families struggle to scrape up enough money to feed their children some *ugali* (corn meal mush) or *matoke* (mashed green bananas). Meat is an expensive delicacy.

I am thankful for my house. On Tuesday, I visited a pastor who lives in a two-room apartment in the Ugandan village of Migeera. The kitchen is on a stoop outside the front door. The bathroom is in a separate building and is shared by several families. Yet Ugandans from rural areas would consider this home extravagant compared to their one-room mud huts.

I am thankful for running water and indoor toilets. I've had to take bucket baths with cold water on some of my Africa trips because water pressure is either low or water isn't available. On my recent trip to Kenya, my hosts boiled water on their stove so I could have a warm bath. And many Africans use a spade to dig their own latrines; then they cover their waste with dirt.

I am thankful for reliable electricity. I've been quick to complain when a storm knocks out the power in my home for a few hours. Yet the majority of Ugandans are not connected to the power grid, and they burn wood for cooking. In the nation of Malawi, in southern Africa, 80 percent of the population lacks access to electricity. They use kerosene lanterns for light.

I am thankful for health care. Many Ugandans don't live past 60 because of disease and the hardships of life. I've met several people there who said their mothers died in childbirth. While we certainly need to reform our own health care system, we should be grateful that one of America's biggest challenges is caring for elderly people who would not have survived in other countries.

I am thankful I can read. In one of the churches I visited in Uganda, 60 percent of the members are illiterate. This is usually because their parents couldn't afford to pay their school fees.

I am thankful for my car. Only a minority of Ugandans own their own vehicles. Most people use public transportation—usually vans packed full of travelers or motorcycle taxis called *boda bodas*. And many people walk or ride bicycles for miles in the hot sun to get anywhere.

I am thankful for inexpensive fuel. I complained when the cost of fuel jumped 50 cents a gallon after Hurricane Harvey closed refineries. Yet today, gas has leveled to \$ per gallon. In Uganda, the price is about \$ a gallon, yet wages are just a fraction of ours. That makes travel impossible for many people there.

I am thankful for good roads. In the United States, we have the most advanced road system in the world, with multi-lane interstates, modern drainage systems and reliable bridges. When I was in Kenya, I drove on a major highway that was only

partially paved and had potholes the size of whole cars. A 100-mile journey can take a whole day because of rough conditions.

I am thankful for our democratic system of government. While I was in Africa this week, President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe resigned after a majority of his people demanded his ouster. He has been in power since 1980. Many other African countries suffer because the leaders they elected became tyrants who abused power and stashed billions of dollars of government funds in private accounts.

Many Americans today are fuming, either because they didn't like what President Obama did for eight years or because they hate what President Trump is doing today. But the real blessing is that the United States places term limits on its leaders. We don't tolerate dictatorship. Our founders established a system of law that is bigger than one person.

This Thanksgiving, look around and count the blessings you've failed to notice. Before you complain about your poor wi-fi signal, your long commute to work, the annoying passenger on your flight, the quality of service at your favorite steak house or the poor cell phone service on your Caribbean cruise, think about how many people in the world would trade places with you. Be grateful.