

# Watch Out for the Virus of Spiritual Pride

Does anyone remember Robert Tilton's Word of Faith World Outreach Center in Dallas? It was one of the biggest megachurches in the country back in the 1980s. Tilton broadcast his popular "Success-N-Life" seminars all over the country from the church, until he was exposed for financial fraud. Word of Faith's building was lost in foreclosure and it was later demolished.

The Cathedral of the Holy Spirit, a church founded by Earl Paulk Jr. in the Atlanta suburbs, met a similar fate. It had 10,000 members before a sex scandal wiped it off the map. And don't forget Bishop Carlton Pearson's 5,000-member Higher Dimensions Family Church in Tulsa. It's closed.

In my years of observing the ups and downs of our movement, I've noticed a common cause when big churches abruptly close. I call it the virus of spiritual pride. And I am concerned that this virus is back today. We would do well to protect ourselves from infection. If you see any of these attitudes in your church, you can be sure that spiritual pride is spreading like a disease:

**"We do church better."** I know of one church planting movement that believes their Sunday morning formula is the only one that works. Beware when church leaders start fantasizing that they alone are the catalyst for spiritual revival in the world. Success is great, but it can also cause your downfall. If you take credit for all the good things happening in your ministry, you are on the path to shutdown. You are not the Holy Spirit! Give God the credit He deserves and acknowledge that there are plenty of other churches that are reaching people for Jesus even though they use different methods.

**“Our pastor is the best.”** In Uganda, a prophet named Elvis Mbonye attracts 5,000 people weekly to his church. He sits on a golden throne and invites parishioners to approach the stage, bow to him and kiss his feet. You may say that could never happen in America. But I see the same kind of celebrity worship on display in some of today’s megachurches. Let’s beware. A church built on one man’s charisma, pulpit swagger or even supernatural gifts will eventually crumble. The best preachers don’t demand attention; rather, they are busy training their replacements so the anointing doesn’t stop with them.

**“We have the ‘secret’ revelation.”** It was spiritual pride that moved Joseph Smith to found the Mormon Church—because he claimed to have secret information about Jesus Christ that no other church had. Smith’s revelations proved to be bogus, but millions have been deceived by his doctrines. Spiritual pride leads people into deception. Members of the Colossian church began to have grandiose visions (see Col. 2:18), yet their hyper-spirituality created divisions in the church. Any prophecy or vision that suggests, “We have more of the truth than all other churches,” is not from God!

**“We are the coolest Christians.”** The spirit of pride creates an “us vs. them” mentality. The same devil who tempted Jesus in the wilderness whispers to us: “You are better than them. You have the anointing—they don’t. You have paid the price—they haven’t. You are the new wineskin—they are old and irrelevant.” This was the sin of the church in Ephesus. They had opposed false teachers and false apostles, yet Jesus rebuked them because they had lost their first love (see Rev. 2:4). Pride always distorts reality and makes you look better than others!

**“God favors our group.”** There are many wonderful church movements on the scene today. Some are highly visible on television and social media; others produce music that is hugely popular. Every one of these movements has an important

contribution to make—whether it's Hillsong, Bethel Church, Elevation, Gateway, Planet Shakers or ARC. We should be thankful for what God is doing in each of them.

At the same time, there are also many smaller, lesser known churches and movements that don't have the huge audiences, the big money, the media buzz or the "cool factor" that these groups have—yet God is also working through them. Never join a group because of the numbers or the cool factor. Don't jump on bandwagons just because everyone else is. Follow the Holy Spirit, not men.

Let God lead you to the church where He can most effectively use you. And wherever God plants you, stay humble and avoid the deadly virus of pride.

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## **A Message of Comfort During the Storm**

It was bad enough that Pastor Steve McKnight and his wife, Teresa, lost both their house and their church when Hurricane Katrina slammed into New Orleans 12 years ago. Last weekend they had to evacuate their house again—this time in Corpus Christi, Texas—because Hurricane Harvey was headed straight toward them.

This time, thankfully, the damage to their home in Texas was minimal. And this time their church, Gateway Christian Center, is functioning as a relief center for storm victims.

Today, McKnight has a message for all those along the Gulf Coast who are going through this 2017 disaster.

“We lost everything but the clothes on our backs in 2005, but He has restored everything,” McKnight told me yesterday, shortly after power was restored to his home. “Teresa and I are still standing. Today we are still serving the Lord. We have each other, and we have an awesome son who loves the Lord. We are so blessed.”

Hurricane Katrina was a nightmare for the McKnights. After they evacuated New Orleans, their home was submerged in several feet of water. Their church, River of Life Worship Center, was totally destroyed—and it was not insured. Nothing in their home was salvageable, including a room full of diapers and baby presents that had just been given to Teresa, who was nearing her due date.

The McKnights’ son, Isaac, was born just days later. The couple moved temporarily into an office at a church in Birmingham, Alabama. A few days later, a wealthy Christian family from the Atlanta area offered to house them in a fully furnished, four-bedroom home. Other blessings began to pour in.

Eventually the McKnights got back on their feet and began pastoring again in Alabama, then in their native Louisiana and eventually in Texas.

The temporal things they lost in the storm were eventually replaced. Their frayed nerves were calmed. Their peace was restored. And their faith grew stronger.

One thing that carried the McKnights through that 2005 disaster was a song that became wildly popular that year. It was the Casting Crowns hit “I Will Praise You Through This Storm.” The chorus says this:

*But as the thunder rolls / I barely hear You whisper through  
the rain /*

*“I’m with you” / And as Your mercy falls /*

*I raise my hands and praise the God who gives and takes away.*

While the McKnights are grateful that the eye of Hurricane Harvey didn't pass over Corpus Christi as was expected, they are concerned about the families in coastal Texas who lost their homes, and for the estimated 30,000 people who have moved to temporary shelters because of the floods in Houston.

"We pray for those who are going through this," says Steve. "I know what they are going through. I felt the most helpless I have ever felt in my life after Katrina. But I also know the Lord brought us through that storm. He can do the same for those affected by Hurricane Harvey."

Steve said when he and his wife were going through the shock of losing everything to Katrina, they found genuine comfort from the Holy Spirit's presence. "We learned the value of spending time praising Him every day, no matter what is happening. We learned the value of praying in the Holy Spirit."

When Hurricane Harvey was headed for Texas last week, Teresa couldn't believe this was happening again. She immediately prepared to evacuate because she didn't want to live through another disaster. But she found comfort in the fact that the name of her city, Corpus Christi, means "body of Christ." She knew she could hide in Jesus and find safety.

Says Steve: "We try to spiritualize everything so much that we miss the simplicity of the message of the gospel. The Holy Spirit is our Comforter. Second Corinthians 1:3 says God is 'the God of all comfort.' He comforts us in all of our tribulations. We need to rely on Him and trust Him."

As they reach out to the storm victims around them in south Texas, the McKnights are still humming that song from 2005. And they invite those affected by Hurricane Harvey to sing these words written by Mark Hall and Bernie Herms:

*And I'll praise You in this storm / And I will lift my hands  
/  
For You are who You are / No matter where I am /  
And every tear I've cried / You hold in Your hand /  
You never left my side / And though my heart is torn /  
I will praise You in this storm.*

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## **Tearing Down Our Monuments to Racism**

A 93-year-old statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee triggered the ugly protest that erupted in Charlottesville, Virginia, on Aug. 12. White nationalists and KKK members marched through the city to protect the statue; counter-protesters demanded that it be removed. In the end, three people died in the violence—including a woman who was run over by a white supremacist's car.

What happened in Charlottesville is likely to happen elsewhere. There are approximately 1,500 Confederate monuments in the United States—in front of courthouses and libraries, in parks, on campuses and even carved on a granite mountain near Atlanta. For some people, these monuments are harmless tributes to dead soldiers; for others, they are offensive reminders of slavery and white pride.

Over the past few years local governments have been removing Confederate statues in an effort to be more racially sensitive:

- In Tampa, Florida, a Confederate monument is being relocated from a courthouse to a cemetery
- Four statues of Confederate soldiers have been removed from public view in New Orleans
- Busts of Confederate Generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson have been removed from the Hall of Fame of Great Americans in New York
- The city of Annapolis, Maryland, has removed a 145-year-old statue of Chief Justice Roger Taney, who wrote the 1857 Dred Scott Decision. (His ruling said slaves were not citizens of the United States and therefore were not protected by law.)
- A statue of a Confederate soldier named “Old Joe” was peacefully removed from courthouse grounds in Gainesville, Florida, and will be relocated
- After the violence in Charlottesville, the mayor of Baltimore quickly ordered four Confederate statues removed from city property.

Similar removals and relocations of Confederate statues, obelisks and memorials are in process in Missouri, Kentucky and Texas. Meanwhile in Durham, North Carolina, a group of rowdy protesters pulled down a Confederate statue and broke it on Aug. 14. They could be seen on video kicking the image as they sang and cheered.

Also last week, the mayor of Birmingham, Alabama, covered a prominent Confederate monument with a tarp and erected a plywood structure around it—prompting the state’s attorney general to file suit against the city. Mayor William Bell defended his actions by saying: “The God I know doesn’t put one race over another.”

Welcome to America 2017. We are still a nation divided. But we cannot let our memories of the first Civil War trigger a second one. Here are three principles that should guide us during this season of soul-searching:

1. **Let's be willing to let go of the past.** I'm a Southerner. I was born in Louisiana, and I spent my boyhood in Alabama and my teenage years in Georgia. I even had an ancestor who died fighting for the South. But I'm not a Confederate; I'm an American. And my black and immigrant friends will assure you I'm not a racist.

I don't need a Confederate memorial to remind me of my heritage; my identity is in Jesus Christ, not in the South. I should be more concerned with loving my African-American friends than in protecting or preserving my white heritage. I totally understand why black people feel oppressed by Confederate flags or statues of Civil War soldiers. Instead of being offended by their feelings, I should empathize with them.

2. **Let's be respectful to each other in the process.** The young protesters in Durham, North Carolina, tied a rope around a Confederate statue and pulled it down. Then they kicked it and spit on it as they chanted, "We are the revolution." Seven of those protesters are now under arrest for inciting a riot and for damaging public property. Angry mobs will not heal America's racial problems. If we want to overcome hate, we have to do it decently—and with the same commitment to non-violence that Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. espoused in the 1960s.

Let's not be foolish. We can't put out fire with fire. Vigilante vandalism is not the way to heal this country. I don't support the message of a Confederate statue, but neither do I support the hateful, vindictive ways some people today are trampling on history. We shouldn't let mobs smash the statues. They should be moved from their pedestals of prominence and put in museums where future generations can ponder our mistakes. (And I would suggest that when they are removed, ministers should be there to publicly repent for our racist sins against each other.)

### 3. **Let's be aware of spiritual realities behind our icons.**

The Bible says most of Israel's kings refused to tear down the "high places" of idol worship that had been set up by the Canaanites. Only King Hezekiah and King Josiah had the moral courage to fully tear down these pagan structures (see 1 Kings 15:14, 2 Kings 18:4). There is no question that our country has tolerated a spiritual stronghold of racism; is it possible that these stone memorials of Civil War "heroes" have helped keep our nation divided?

As a Christian, and as a Southerner named Lee (yes, my 90-year-old father was named after two Civil War generals), I believe it's time to put our ugly past behind us. We will do that not simply by removing offensive monuments but also by asking Jesus to break the power of racism if it still has a place in our hearts.

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## **The Demonic Roots of White Supremacy**

I had just finished performing a wedding in North Carolina last Saturday when I checked my phone and saw the alarming news: White supremacists were marching in Charlottesville, Virginia, to protest the removal of a Confederate statue. A few minutes later, when my friends were about to begin the wedding reception with a barbecue feast, I learned that a 20-year-old white nationalist had plowed his Dodge Challenger into a group of counter-protesters, killing one person and injuring 19 others.

I lost my appetite.

I'm still sad today, especially after learning that the young man responsible for the mayhem in Virginia on August 12 was identified with Vanguard America, a hate group that promotes the idea that America should be an exclusively white nation.

James Alex Fields Jr., of Maumee, Ohio, was obviously mentally disturbed. He had been diagnosed with schizophrenia—and this may explain why he wasn't accepted in the U.S. Army when he tried to enlist in 2015. Fields had been fascinated with Nazi Germany and white supremacy since ninth grade. He idolized Adolf Hitler.

Fields is now classified as a domestic terrorist. He is also part of a demonic movement in this country that needs to be denounced in the strongest terms.

Racism is sick. Neo-Nazism is sick. And despite what some smug, churchgoing racists may tell you, these philosophies are totally incompatible with Christianity. White nationalism is an idea that was hatched in hell itself.

Nazism was spawned in Germany with the idea that white Aryans ("pure" Germans with no mixed-race lineage) are the "superior race," and that nature has selected them scientifically to outlast darker-skinned people. This fueled Hitler's rise to power.

Hitler was totally opposed to belief in God. He was convinced that Darwinian evolution controlled the world, and that all of life could be understood by watching the Aryan race struggle to gain dominance. He championed the idea that Jews, Southern Europeans and Gypsies were human vermin, destined for extinction. (Hitler called these people "bacteria.")

Hitler also supported bizarre eugenics programs, forcing people he considered inferior to be sterilized. And a huge majority of Germans, under the spell of this spiritual deception, supported Nazi policies.

It is no surprise that many Christians in the 1940s viewed Hitler as the Antichrist. He once told an eyewitness: "The biggest evil for the German people is accepting Christian humility." Pride consumed the fuhrer. At least 6 million Jews died in the German holocaust because of his sinister ideas, along with 1.8 million non-Jewish Poles, 220,000 Gypsies, 250,000 handicapped people and an undetermined number of homosexuals.

When the Nazi regime failed in 1945, Hitler killed himself. But his ideas did not die. There are more than a dozen major neo-Nazi and white nationalist groups operating in the United States and Canada today. There are many more groups in Europe, South Africa and Asia. The White Nationalist Party operates in England, a Heathen Front exists in Norway and an organization called the Stormer Troll Army has an international membership.

The spirit that possessed Hitler is still at work. If this doesn't prove the existence of a real devil, I don't know what will.

White supremacy is part of the antichrist spirit mentioned in the New Testament. It is in complete opposition to Christ's gospel, for the following reasons:

- When God chose to send His Son into the world, He was born to a Jewish woman. Jesus would not have been considered "Aryan"—He was a man of color. Yet He called people of all races to a salvation that was not based on race but on faith in God's incredible love and mercy.
- The church that Jesus founded began with His first Jewish followers, but it quickly became mixed with Italians, Greeks, Ethiopians and other Gentiles. Jesus broke the "dividing wall" between Jew and Gentile (see Eph. 2:14). He defeated racism! And He commissioned His followers to take the gospel to all nations. Christianity has always been multiethnic.
- The first apostles made it clear that Christ's kingdom

is based on love for one another. Christians are not allowed to hate people—and they are certainly not allowed to belong to hate groups. John made this clear when he wrote: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar” (1 John 4:20a). Racial hatred, bigotry and prejudice of any kind are polar opposites of Christian faith.

In 2015 another young white supremacist, Dylann Roof, walked into an African-American church in Charleston and shot nine black Christians—including their pastor—during a Bible study. Investigations showed that Roof was “self-radicalized,” meaning he adopted his white supremacist views from reading articles on the Internet. He later confessed that he shot his victims in order to start a race war.

Now another troubled man, influenced by similar teachings, has killed a woman in Charlottesville—and he has proved once again that this white nationalist philosophy is a demonic spirit that still haunts America.

We can’t soft-pedal on this. We can’t compromise with it. When Jesus cast out a demon, He named it. We, too, should name the evil that is in our midst. Every pastor in America, and every government leader—including our president—should expose white supremacy for what it is. {eoa}

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## **Let’s Trade Our Titles for True Humility**

Last week when I was preaching in the nation of Iceland, I befriended three young foreign students from Africa who were visiting our conference near Reykjavik. I noticed these guys

were sitting in the back of the auditorium, so I invited them to sit with me up front. They later admitted to me that I was the first preacher they'd ever met who greeted people before a service.

"In my country, most preachers come into the auditorium after the worship, and they don't speak to anyone," one of the brothers told me.

When I told these brothers they could call me Lee, they were shocked. They expected me to demand a long-winded ecclesiastical title.

I'm often asked if I have a title, and my answer doesn't satisfy some people. I don't consider myself a pastor because I travel so much. All kinds of labels have been pinned on me: reverend, prophet, apostle, even bishop.

Once I was introduced to a church as "Dr. Grady," and I almost crawled under my seat. I only have a college degree. There are no letters after my name.

Today it seems we've developed a title fetish. For a while everyone in charismatic circles was becoming a bishop, and some were installed into this office with rings, robes and funny-looking hats. Then the same guys with the pointy hats started calling themselves apostles. Then the prophets got jealous and started calling themselves apostles too! I knew one lady who, not to be outdone, required people to call her "exalted prophetess."

Now the latest fad is requiring church folks to address certain people as apostles. As in, "When apostle Holy Moly arrives, please only address him as, 'apostle,' and then make sure he is seated in a private room while his two 'armor bearers,' wearing dark glasses, guard his door." I know of one popular preacher who sends his hosts a letter explaining that he must be called "apostle" anytime his name is used from the stage!

Some of these title-seekers have even invented an elaborate theology to go along with their ridiculous rule. They say you can't receive the true anointing from a man of God if you don't honor him with his right title.

Sounds so very ooh-oooh spiritual to the naive. But it's charismatic garbage.

Jesus didn't play this religious game, especially when he was around the grand poobahs of His day—the long-robed, nose-in-the-air scribes and Pharisees. After accusing them of loving the best seats in the synagogues, He pointed out that they loved to be called “Rabbi” by men (see Matt. 23:7).

Then He warned them: “But do not be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brothers ... For he who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Matt. 23:8,12).

People have quibbled over these words for centuries, insisting that pride is what Jesus was rebuking, not titles. I would agree that Jesus was going to the root sin. But He was also asking these guys if they'd be willing to ditch their labels and act like normal people.

When I was in China several years ago, I met some amazing leaders who had planted thousands of congregations. They had also spent a lot of time in jail for their faith, and they'd been beaten with iron rods for preaching the gospel. They were the bravest apostles I've ever met.

But when I asked them if they used “apostle” as a title, one guy said: “We believe in those roles in the church. But we prefer to call each other ‘brother’ or ‘sister.’”

That settled the issue for me.

If these Chinese giants of the faith—and true apostles—don't require to be addressed with titles, then Your Worshipful

Grand Master Rev. Dr. Bishop Big Deal Jones who claims oversight of maybe four churches shouldn't wear his ministry role around his neck like a tacky neon name badge.

If people can't see the anointing on your life through your character, then don't cheapen the gospel by wearing a title you don't deserve.

I'm not saying people shouldn't use reverend, minister or even bishop to identify their roles in the church. One of my mentors is a bishop, and he is one of the most humble men I know. But can we please dispense with the insecurity and the childish "I'm more important than you" appellations and get back to the simplicity of the gospel? Let's get over ourselves!

Jesus is the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Son of David, the Prince of Peace and the Apostle of our Confession. Yet when He came into this world, He laid aside His heavenly glory and took on the lowly name of Jesus. He wore no fancy robes. He demanded no titles. He had no "armor bearers." He even bore His own cross until He was too weak to drag it to Calvary.

If we want to serve Jesus honorably, we must forsake our need for fame and cast our crowns at His feet.

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## **How Beth Moore Is Calling Down Pentecostal Fire**

I've been in countless Christian meetings over the years, but last week, I witnessed one of the most remarkable spiritual moments of my lifetime.

I was attending a gathering of Pentecostals held at a convention center in Orlando, Florida. When the speaker concluded the sermon, people began to stream to the altar. Many of them—including pastors—lay prostrate on the floor. Many were sobbing uncontrollably. Some people wept and prayed for an hour after the meeting was dismissed.

You may ask, “What’s so remarkable about that?” This meeting, held on July 26, was unique because the speaker was a Southern Baptist—and a woman. Yet her message was so convicting and so saturated in the Holy Spirit that people ran to the stage even though she didn’t even invite people to the altar.

The woman was author and popular women’s speaker Beth Moore, and the occasion was the 28th General Conference of the International Pentecostal Holiness Church. Leaders from the Assemblies of God, the Church of God and Nigeria’s Redeemed Christian Church of God were in attendance, along with thousands of Pentecostals from all over the world.

Moore based her message on Jeremiah 12:5: “If you have run with the footmen, and they have wearied you, then how can you contend with horses?” Without a tinge of self-righteousness or condemnation, Moore lamented the powerless state of the modern church and called us back to the raw authenticity of New Testament faith.

“We are settling for woefully less than what Jesus promised us,” said Moore. “I read my New Testament over and over. I’m not seeing what He promised. I’m unsettled and unsatisfied.”

She added: “I want holy fire!”

I don’t know what is more fascinating—that a Baptist challenged Pentecostals to embrace Pentecostal fire or that a woman who is not supposed to preach to men in her own denomination brought male pastors to their knees in repentance.

“We’ve lost our tolerance for pain and given ourselves to whining,” Moore declared. “We have settled for the spiked Kool-Aid of cool, cultural Christianity. What will make us relevant is not our cool factor. It’s time for leadership to repent.”

I’ve heard a lot of excellent preaching over the years. But listening to Beth Moore was uncanny because her sermon was not about her, and it didn’t draw attention to her. There was no swagger. There was no pretense. The sweet dew of heaven rested on this woman.

I could hear the Holy Spirit speaking loud and clear through a broken vessel.

That’s why people responded so dramatically, even though Moore simply closed her Bible and sat down when she finished her message. Everyone in the room knew they had heard God speak. They hit their knees because the anointing of the Holy Spirit wooed them to surrender pride, complacency and man-made religion.

What is baffling about this whole experience is that there are large numbers of Christians today who don’t believe Beth Moore should be preaching to audiences like the one in Orlando. In fact, some fundamentalists have launched attacks on her because she preaches authoritatively from pulpits. One online blogger says Moore “puts the ‘her’ in heresy” simply because men listen to her teaching. It grieves me that this anointed sister in Christ has been subjected to such disrespect.

The old argument employed by some conservative fundamentalists is that Paul, in 1 Timothy 2:12, forbid women to preach. They seem to ignore the fact that 1) Paul empowered many women in other locations to speak and that women such as Phoebe, Priscilla, Chloe, Euodia and Syntyche were on his ministry team; 2) that the Bible offers other examples of godly women leaders and prophets; and 3) that Paul’s unique concern in 1

Timothy 2:12 was about women in Ephesus who were “usurping” authority and teaching twisted doctrines.

The New Testament is clear that God has called all Christians to be His witnesses, and that both “your sons and your daughters” will prophesy in the last days (Acts 2:17). Our passion should be to see everyone empowered—regardless of race, class, age or gender. If we truly want Pentecost, we should want to see the flame of the Spirit resting on the heads of every person—not just white males over 50.

We really shouldn’t be too worried if God wants to use a woman today to call people to repentance. If He used Catherine Booth to shake England in the 1800s, or missionary Mary Slessor to plant the gospel in Nigeria, or Sojourner Truth to challenge slavery through her powerful preaching, or Kathryn Kuhlman to spark a healing revival in the United States in the 1970s, why are we still arguing about this?

We need an army of women like Beth Moore, and my prayer is that more women will seek the Lord and dig into His Word with the same passion that Moore has. I believe she is a forerunner for a new generation of both men and women who will carry a holy Pentecostal fire that cannot be restricted by gender.  
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## **Don’t Misuse the Gift of Personal Prophecy**

Twelve years ago, when I was preaching at a Brazilian congregation in Florida, the Lord directed my attention to a young teenager sitting in the back of the church. He was leaning his head against the wall and looking very bored. But

God gave me a prophetic message for this curly-headed guy, so I asked him to stand; then I spoke to him about his spiritual calling.

“God says you are going to be a spiritual warrior,” I told him.

The boy’s name was Felipe, and we became good friends after I gave him that word of encouragement. Today, at age 27, he’s a passionate follower of Christ and the youth pastor of his church.

I love the gift of prophecy because I’ve seen countless people like Felipe transformed by it. One prophetic message from God can break the power of discouragement. It can also launch a person into ministry or confirm God’s divine direction. As Proverbs 25:11 says, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.” A personal prophetic word is like a priceless piece of heirloom jewelry. You will treasure it for life.

Some people question whether personal prophecy is biblical. Yet prophets often delivered detailed messages to people in Old Testament times. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul urged believers to “earnestly desire” prophecy above all other gifts (see 1 Cor. 14:1). He also told the Corinthians that true prophetic ministry can expose the secrets of men’s hearts and bring them to repentance (1 Cor. 14:24-25).

In Colossians 4:17, Paul issued a word of prophetic encouragement to an individual on his ministry team. He wrote: “Tell Archippus, ‘Make sure that you fulfill the ministry which you have received in the Lord.’” Paul delivered this short but powerful message to Archippus to strengthen his friend. I am sure Archippus never forgot Paul’s very personal words.

Personal prophetic ministry is vital today. People need to know that God is not a dry doctrine; He wants to know us

intimately, and He wants to speak to us in a personal way. Yet we must be careful to avoid the abuses that have given personal prophecy a bad name. Here are some helpful guidelines that will keep it healthy.

1. **Don't chase prophecies.** I know Christians who will travel across the country to attend a conference to get a word from God, yet they haven't read the Bible in months or sat still long enough to hear from God on their own. Never treat the gift of prophecy like fortune-telling. When God needs to speak to you in an unusual way, He has faithful messengers who will deliver the message to you at the exact time you need it. Meanwhile, soak your mind in Scripture—and never elevate personal prophecy above God's Word.
2. **Never give prophets elite status.** Nowhere in the New Testament are prophets exalted to a privileged class. Paul himself said all members of the body need each other, and in his discussion of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12-14, he warns against ranking spirituality by gifting. He wrote, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'" (1 Cor. 12:21). Some people are mesmerized by prophets who claim to know people's phone numbers, addresses or Social Security numbers. Be sure to test the validity of a prophet's gift if he attempts to impress people with his exotic prophetic abilities. True prophecy does not have to be spooky; its main purpose is to encourage the hearer, not to draw attention to the messenger.
3. **Never give harsh prophetic words.** New Testament prophecy should encourage, comfort and exhort believers (see 1 Cor. 14:3). That rules out condemnation and harsh criticism disguised as a word from God. Our heavenly Father does not speak to His children in a hateful, scolding tone. He is an encourager, even when He brings

needed correction. Remember: Paul said that if you use the gift of prophecy without love, it is useless (see 1 Cor. 13:2).

I know of a church where a lady routinely gave personal words to people warning of calamities or judgments. She even claimed God wanted to kill them! Usually angry “prophets” like this woman claim to know all the unconfessed sins in a person’s life; the truth is they struggle to understand God’s love themselves, and they are seeking attention. Stay away from weird, abusive people who claim to be prophets but don’t show the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

4. **Soak in God’s Word.** Prophecy will never, ever contradict the Bible. So if you want to speak God’s prophetic message to others, you must hide the Scriptures in your heart. If you fill your well with the Word, it will spill over and refresh many when you speak under the anointing of the Spirit. I often meditate on Proverbs 10:32a, which promises: “The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable.”

If you feel called to prophesy, that’s great! God wants to speak through you to others. But don’t assume you know everything. Don’t be so eager to go until you grow to maturity. Find a mentor and learn how to minister with grace, love and biblical balance. {eoa}

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## The Most Dangerous Prayer in

# the Bible

More than 19 years ago, I found myself at a church altar in Orlando, Florida. God had been dealing with me about leaving my comfort zone. I had a great job with nice benefits, yet I felt spiritually unfulfilled. I knew there was an amazing adventure in front of me, but I had placed serious limitations on my obedience.

As I buried my head in the carpet in that church, I realized God was requiring unconditional surrender. He wanted me to wave a white flag. I knew what I had to say, but it was difficult to form the words. Finally, I coughed them up. I said the same thing the prophet Isaiah prayed long ago: "Here I am, send me!" (Is. 6:8b).

This is what I call a dangerous prayer. It should include a warning label!

I believe when you utter these simple words, heaven takes a Polaroid picture of you with your hands up—and an amazing process begins. God closes in on us in order to crush our fears and demolish our selfishness. Then He gives us the holy boldness to speak what we were afraid to say.

When I prayed this prayer in 1998, I immediately had a vision while I was still on the floor. I saw a sea of African faces. I knew I'd be going to Africa, and I was scared to death. I had no idea how I would get there, what I would say or who would pay for the trip. So I swallowed hard and prayed again: *Here I am, send me!*

Less than two years later, I found myself standing on a huge stage in a sports arena in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, speaking to 7,000 pastors. I did not enjoy the bumpy flight across the Sahara, and my knees were knocking when I preached. I felt as if I had been pushed way out on a limb.

But even though I was terrified, my fear was mixed with incredible joy. The Lord had overcome my resistance, and He was using me. Since that trip, I have ministered in more than 30 countries. This week, I have been in Malaysia and Singapore, all because I prayed a dangerous prayer.

Grace is so amazing. God not only gives us the power to serve Him; He plants in us the desire to surrender to His will even if we are scared of the consequences. This is what the apostle Paul described when he said: "For God is the One working in you, both to will and to do His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13).

God has an uncanny way of wooing us into obedience and submission. Our flesh may protest; our fears may paralyze us. But in the end, if we will simply lift our hands in surrender, grace takes over. He gives us power, strength and a willing heart. And the results are supernatural because it is God at work in us.

Jesus taught His disciples to cultivate this willing spirit and to pray this dangerous prayer. He told them: "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest" (Luke 10:2).

This is what I call a trick prayer. You pray it at your own risk. When we ask the Lord to send workers into His fields, we are really praying, "Here I am, Lord. Send Mike—or Chuck—or Barbara." But the Lord of the harvest will likely tap you on the shoulder and say, "Well? What about you?"

The church has advanced throughout history because of people who surrendered to God. One of them was the brave David Brainerd (1718-1747), a missionary to American Indians during the First Great Awakening. Although he died of tuberculosis at age 29, his legacy of total consecration lives on in his journal, published by his friend Jonathan Edwards.

Brainerd recorded this very dangerous prayer in his diary:

“Here am I, send me; send me to the ends of the earth; send me to the rough, the savage pagans of the wilderness; send me from all that is called comfort on earth; send me even to death itself, if it be but in Thy service, and to promote Thy kingdom.”

We rarely hear prayers like that today. Brainerd’s passion would be considered politically incorrect fanaticism today. We don’t promote self-sacrifice; we have a new gospel of self-fulfillment. We don’t talk about carrying a burden for lost people; we ourselves are lost in our comfortable materialism.

I wonder what would happen if all of us prayed Isaiah’s prayer with full sincerity. What if you raised your hands and left all your fears, worries, excuses, stipulations, limitations and conditions on heaven’s altar—and invited God to use your life in any way He wants.

I invite you to take the risk. Pray a dangerous prayer, and see how God will use you. {eoa}

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## **Don’t Run if God Has Called You to Speak**

This past 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. No big deal. 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,” he said.

When I tell friends that I stubbornly resisted the call of God to preach because of my lack of confidence, they act surprised. They don’t know how much anguish I went through. They think most people who stand in pulpits want to be there. They can’t believe that I wrestled with God for months when I felt He was calling me to speak.

We assume God chooses certain people to preach because of their oratory skills. But true preaching is not a natural exercise—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 do this in the flesh, the results are miserable; 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 his stuttering, Gideon tried to disqualify himself because of his family background, and Jeremiah complained about the responsibility of carrying a prophetic burden. Jonah bought a one-way ticket to the other side of the Mediterranean Sea so he wouldn’t have to give his unpopular sermon!

And the apostle Paul, who was a silver-tongued Pharisee before he met Christ, was stripped of his eloquence before he preached throughout the Roman Empire. 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).

If Paul trembled when he spoke, I have no right to complain when I feel butterflies in my stomach for the thousandth time.

Charismatic revivalist Arthur Katz 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 in contemporary America. We celebrate the smooth and the polished. 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, get lots of hits on social media and even build megachurches. But the kingdom is not built on hipster style or smug self-confidence. We need God's honest words, sent straight from the authentic heart of a broken vessel. The church will live in spiritual famine until reluctant, weak and trembling preachers allow His holy fire to come out of their mouths.

If you have a message from God, stop running. If you are wrestling with God like Jacob did, quit resisting, and let your Maker break your pride; He wants you to walk with a limp

the rest of your life so you can lean on Him rather than on your own ability. Die to your fears, doubts and excuses, and drink the cup of suffering that accompanies the genuine call of God. {eoa}

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## How to Control Your Tongue in the Trump Era

Last week, President Trump issued a tweet from the White House, mocking MSNBC host Mika Brzezinski's appearance and questioning her sanity. And after both Republicans and Democrats in Washington begged Trump to use a more civil tone in his communication, he took to Twitter again, calling Brzezinski "dumb as a rock" and her on-air partner, Joe Scarborough, "crazy."

What is going on here? Trump's defenders say liberal journalists deserve harsh treatment because they relentlessly insult the president. Trump's deputy press secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, said her boss "fights fire with fire." She added: "The American people elected a fighter."

Liberal politicians and journalists questioned whether Trump is mentally stable. Meanwhile Republicans begged their leader to calm down. Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina said Trump's tweetstorm was "beneath the office and represents what is wrong with American politics."

This is all new territory for us as Americans. Social media now allows our president, along with his political enemies, to toss verbal grenades while the audience listens to the explosions in real time. I'm sure politicians said awful things about each other before the digital age. But with

Twitter, the ugliness is out there for us all to read and respond to with our own angry retorts.

Trump was certainly not elected because of his politeness. He is gruff and feisty, and his remarks often sound like those of a playground bully. His in-your-face attitude is what endeared him to many voters who are sick of conventional politics. They want a president who acts like a professional wrestler, breathing threats and flexing his muscles.

It remains to be seen whether this combative tone will work for President Trump or whether it will backfire. But this is certainly not the tone we need in the church today. Politicians may argue, and comedians may pull ugly stunts. But as a Christian, I can't lower myself to this level.

I am called to reflect the love of Jesus. So are you.

The spirit of the world wants us to take sides in this nasty battle. The devil wants us to hate each other, bicker and throw mud. But the kingdom of Jesus transcends this divisive world. We are called to love people and share Christ with them. If politics prevents you from fulfilling the Great Commission, then you have traded your faith for an idol.

I know some conservative Christians who have become much angrier since the 2016 election. They can chop liberal politicians and journalists into pieces with their words. I also know some left-leaning Christians who have changed into monsters because they are so angry. They seethe with so much animosity toward Donald Trump that they are becoming the bully they say he is.

In this age of outrage, we have lost our first love. How can we rise above this ugly conflict and speak as prophets to our culture? The best way to maintain a prophetic voice is to control your words. Let's remember these simple rules:

1. **Think before you speak.** James 1:19-20 says: "Let every

man be swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God.” The definition of discretion is “the quality of behaving or speaking in such a way as to avoid causing offense.” If someone says something to you that makes you angry, bite your lip and wait before you lash out.

You do not have to have the last word. Don't ruin your testimony by being impetuous. Proverbs 29:20 says it bluntly: “Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.” Sometimes the best thing to do in an argument is to shut up. Proverbs 17:28 says: “Even a fool, when he holds his peace, is counted wise; and he who shuts his lips is esteemed a man of understanding.”

2. **Learn to respond in the opposite spirit.** Anger breeds anger. Mudslinging provokes more mudslinging. But when we have the Holy Spirit inside of us, we have the power to overcome the flesh and manifest the attitude of Jesus. When someone begins arguing, you can turn the conversation by showing compassion or mercy. Proverbs 15:1 says: “A soft answer turns away wrath, but grievous words stir up anger.” You can set the tone.
3. **Let love be your guide.** I Corinthians 16:14 says: “Let all that you do be done in love.” That's a simple but powerful command. If what you are about to write on Facebook isn't loving, don't post it. Let love temper your words and your social media communication. Love builds a platform for you to share Christ, but angry, bitter or demeaning words remove all hope of you communicating the gospel with others.

Don't allow today's toxic public conversation to infect you with hate. Let's model civility, reconciliation and kindness to a nation that needs the love of Jesus. And let's pray that our president, who is surrounded by Christians, will learn to restrain his anger before he tweets. {eoa}