

Church of God Head: Our Forefathers' Anointing Resides on Us

Editor's Note: General Overseer Mark Williams delivered a "state of the church" report last week to the Church of God International Council, which was in session at its international offices in Cleveland, Tenn. Williams' address was the highlight of the opening session of the council and set the tone for the agenda of the group of Church of God world leaders from all parts of the globe. The following is the address in its entirety.

I am going to read a few passages of scripture from Psalm 137; these are very familiar passages. This is what they say, and I think these scriptures are truly apropos to the day to which we have come.

"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. Upon the willows in the midst of it, we hung our harps. For there our captors demanded of us songs, and our tormentors mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.' How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

You will remember that the psalms and the psalter are indeed the worship poems of the nation of Israel. Each of them, in their own unique way, tells something of the stories of the trials, the triumphs and the tragedies of God's people. These are liturgical prayers that span the whole range of human emotion. These are hymns. Many of them are set to song, or set to music, that give voice to the attitudes and the feelings of people in a desperate search for an encounter with God.

There are psalms in this psalter that are psalms of celebration and victory. You'll remember psalms like "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, and the worlds

and they that dwell therein. The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. Lift up your heads oh, ye gates, and lift them up ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in."

There are psalms of decree, there are psalms of ascent, that were chanted among the pilgrims as they were making their way to Jerusalem for the celebration of the feast. There are even Messianic psalms that anticipate the coming of Messiah. All of it concludes with those Hallel songs. "Let everything that hath breath, praise the Lord, praise ye the Lord."

But, praise in this feeling of ascent was as far removed as darkness is from dawn in Psalm 137. Psalm 137 was not a psalm of celebration; this was a psalm of exile. It is a psalm that doesn't envision the beautiful city of Jerusalem, but rather a psalm in Babylon. In captivity with tormentors, demanding a song to be sung in a strange land from people who had been stripped of their culture, stripped of their identity, living in a place where there was no temple; a place where there were tormentors inflicting misery upon them.

Part of the misery was the memories of Zion; what they used to have. But most of the tormenting from their tormentors was the misery of the demand of a song that they felt they could no longer sing. And isn't that the way it feels in the church world today? The world, the flesh, the devil, with the tide of current events, demanding of the church a song; a song in a strange land?

The year was 1886, the eastern hills of Tennessee, and the western hills of North Carolina, where a band of people were gathered together to seek the face of God for reformation and renewal. All led by a 72-year-old missionary Baptist, whose name was R.G. Spurling. He, along with his son and a layman, John Plemmons, had become so concerned about a church that had become encumbered with creeds and traditions, feeling that the protestant reformation was wonderful introducing the law of

faith, but feeling like it did not go far enough to also introduce the law of love. They were desperately praying for a reformation from within and for a revival for withouts. All of that led to a gathering.

As many as are here, present, that are anxious to be freed from manmade creeds and traditions, and are willing to take the New Testament, the law of Christ, and are willing to give to each other the right to read and interpret the scriptures as your conscious may dictate; who are willing to sit together as the Church of God and transact business for the same come forward. That day, eight people and on the second invitation, which we preachers are famous for giving, one more, nine, they came to each other. They gave to each other the right hand of fellowship and out of that humble beginning; the Church of God was born. They called themselves the Christian Union, in an anxious discovery to recover the Church of scripture and to truly become, not just a denomination, per se, but a movement-a kingdom movement-under the power of the Holy Spirit.

Ten years later, into the picture came William Martin, Martin McNad and Joe Tipton who came preaching a doctrine called sanctification; or holiness. That resulted in the gathering at the Shearer schoolhouse in 1896. God poured out His spirit in that little schoolhouse.

One hundred people received the baptism in the Holy Ghost and began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave the utterance. Imagine that five years before Topeka, Kansas; 10 years before the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles, echoing from hill to hill where the sounds of the shouts of praise in the Unicoi Mountains and speaking with other tongues as the Spirit gave the utterance.

As with any revival, heresy and fanaticism and excess threaten to destroy the church, but in 1902 it was reorganized as the Holiness Church in Camp Creek. In 1907, in the second General Assembly, five churches, 150 people they took the name "Church

of God.” Who could have imagined 127 years after our origin, 109 years after the Assembly where we took our name “Church of God,” that we would be sitting here, not with five churches and 150 members, but of over 7 million members, over 15 million people in constituency, grown from five churches to over 35,000 churches from a church there in the Unicoi Mountains, five of them, to now a church in 179 countries of the world? Who could have imagined this movement would now embrace 120 schools and educational institutions, orphanages, ministries to the poor and the hurting and the disenfranchised? How in the world could they have envisioned what God would do for His people and for His church?

Today, I am proud to tell you, that even though we are living in some strange land, the same DNA, the same passion, the same anointing that was in our foremothers and forefathers, resides in us. This is our mission; a mission that is not changed.

The mission of the Church of God is to proclaim the full gospel of Jesus Christ in the Spirit and power of Pentecost. That mission is supported by seven core values, which include: prayer, Pentecostal worship, world evangelization, church planting, interdependence, leadership development and care; all of that to fulfill the mission and the vision of our church.

What is our vision? The vision of our church is to become a movement committed to the authority of scripture for faith and practice. The mission of our church is to become a fellowship whose worship brings God’s power into the life of the church and extends that power into the life of believers into the marketplace.

The mission of our church is to become a body that is directed by the Holy Spirit, fully believing that the baptism in the Holy Spirit is both a personal blessing and an endowment of power for service in fulfilling the Great Commission. Our mission is to become a people who long for God, who hunger for

God, who experience the presence of God, who stand in awe of His Holiness as He transforms us into the image of Jesus Christ. Our mission is to become a New Testament church that focuses on the local congregation, where the pastor nurtures and cares for believers and encourages them to exercise their spiritual gifts. Our church, our vision is to become a church that loves all people and stands actively opposed to any kind of policy that discriminates on the basis of race, color or nationality.

The vision of our church is to become a people that is moved by the hurts and the loneliness of the unsaved, and actively promotes evangelism and discipleship ministries to reach the unsaved and to bring them to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. The vision of our church is to become a church that is Christ-centered, people-oriented, need-sensitive; a church that actively promotes policies and programs to become relevant to every generation.

That vision, that mission, those core values, did not originate with me. I did not just make them up. That's what you find, actually written right here in the book of Minutes, both the international version and the version that is also used here in the United States. They represent the dreams, the hopes, the desires of people from all over the world who have sat together and searched the scriptures as the Church of God.

Now, here we sit with this vision, with this mission, with these core values, with this history, and the question that comes before our Executive Committee, our Executive Council and you and I as brothers and sisters in the Lord is what decisions need to be made to now position the Church of God for its future? What policies must we embrace in order to capture the hopes and the dreams of a new generation? What will it take to reach out into the last frontiers of evangelism and church planting? What are the non-negotiables? What are we willing to die for? What about the poor? What about the disenfranchised? What about those that are

trafficked in human slavery? Bottom line, can our kind of church, 127 years old, reach our kind of world?

The truth is, Peter Thomas, Jacob Nahuway, Ken Anderson, David Ramirez, Jacques Houle, you brothers, you sisters that are around us even at these tables; the fact is, the world that we live in now is radically different from the world where the church was first conceived. I'm talking about our particular movement. It's a world that was totally different from the world that you and I grew up in.

When we look at the world today, we look at a world that has exploded into more than 7 billion people scattered into 4,300 metropolises and mega cities and towns and villages all over the world. The world to which we have come is a world that still battles with hunger. One out of seven people in this world go to bed hungry every night, and of that number, one of three are starving. Much of the world still does not have access to drinkable water that can help them to be healthy.

The world to which we have come is a world that continually faces the threats of global terrorism. Ours is a day when nuclear and biological weapons are a very real and present danger. The world to which we have come today is a world that is so connected financially, globally, that the downturn in the economy on one nation can literally affect the economy of another nation overnight.

The world to which we have come is digitalized, connected together in a web of communication. A world that because of that web of communication, which has given us ready access to available data simply with the touching of our iPad or iPhone; yet also has increased demands and expectations on leaders from the people that we now serve.

The world to which we have come is a world still filled with unreached people. One statistic I read—and there are probably many versions of this, but I bet they are close—there are

11,342 people groups in the world; 6,422 not including the people groups of the United States, that are unreached.

Approximately 571 people groups within the United States have been identified as unreached. And to add to that number, 3,133 people groups, not only are unreached, but are unengaged, where there is absolutely no one that is known to be a witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Ours is a world where the mission field has now also moved west.

The west is a mission field. Ours is a world in which we live in that is filled with pluralism and the plurality of faith. There are over 1 billion Hindus in the world, more than 500 million Buddhists, and more than 450 million people that are engaged in some sort of folk religion. Add to that the rise of Islam in our world; and now—what we in the United States are coming to see as a category we have not looked at before—the religiously unaffiliated.

Ours is a world where people are on the move. Look at the movement of people, migrating, immigrating. Look at the immigration, the diaspora from the Caribbean, the diaspora from Latin America, the diaspora that is spreading throughout the world from Asia, from the Philippines and different parts of the world where people are on the move. Look at globalism and globalization that has now come.

The good news with globalization is that it has interconnected us in such a beautiful way, but it still has not found a way to deal with poverty and the global undernourished. Look at the growth of cities. Get this, 130 people every 60 seconds are moving from rural areas to cities in our world. Look now at the mega cities of our day. Tokyo, Japan; Delhi, India; Mexico City; Shanghai, China; Sao Paulo, Brazil; New York City; those are just a few of the 21 or 22 now defined as mega cities. Ours is a world where change is so rapid, that it is hard for us to keep up with the pace of change. Ours is a world where there is still a struggle with infant mortality.

Ours is a world that is affected by HIV and the AIDS epidemic and sexually transmitted disease. Ours is a world where we now have, what I have called the “pornification” of society; where the evil of pornography has spread throughout the world, and is bringing about the destruction of souls, the destruction of family, and is also, I believe, the chief cause behind sexual trafficking. Every 30 seconds in our world, someone is enslaved in human trafficking. 21 million people, it is estimated, in our world are enslaved in some way.

And yet, it is into this world and it is for this moment, that you and I have been called to stand and to say, the Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance unto the captives, to the recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, and to preach the acceptable year of the Lord. I refuse to believe, that the best days of the Church of God are behind us. I refuse to believe that God is finished with the Church of God and with our partnerships, such as, Gereja Bethel in Indonesia, or the Full Gospel Church of God in South Africa, or our partnerships in Romania and in other parts of the world. I believe God has raised us up for a time such as this, but God help us not to become so trapped in our institutionalism, that we cannot seize the moment for which He has placed us today.

The question is, where do we start? That’s why this Executive Committee has been so patient, kind and enthusiastic to join me in initiating five points of emphasis over these next years. The first is on scripture. I know it sounds simple, but I just feel so led of the Lord to call our church back to the centrality of scripture, to reading God’s Word to living God’s Word; and I’ll tell you why: because when I read God’s Word, I find God’s Word reading me and telling me what I should be doing and what I should not be doing.

This is a day when the spirit of antichrist is at work, and

false teaching and false doctrine are spreading throughout this world, and the only thing that is going to help us to discern false teaching is the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. We need God's Word. I'm so thankful that around the world, we had 127,000 that signed up on the . initiative to daily read God's Word. That shall continue, the Lord's willing, next year; the reading of scripture.

The second point of emphasis, not only is scripture, but also students. I have a burden; we have a burden, to reach our sons and our daughters with the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is a world that the enemy has targeted our children, our young people, to try to rob us from a next generation. I have a 12-year-old and an 18-year-old, so part of this is very personal with me. I plead guilty to that. But I see through the eyes of my 12-year-old and my 18-year-old the kind of sinister forces culturally, academically, every otherwise that are out to rob the soul of our generation. We will, by God's grace, embrace the challenge, that hearts of the fathers will be turned to the children, and children will be turned to the fathers; and our sons and our daughters will prophecy, and our old men will dream dreams, and our young men will see visions. We will not lose this next generation. But, it will require us to be intentional on taking advantage of the 4/14 window opportunities that we will be discussing in this meeting, and other opportunities. Students.

The third point of emphasis in this vision is not only scripture and students, but thirdly, shepherds. Pastors, who are pastoring today, be they in Jakarta, Indonesia, be they in Lusaka, Zambia, be they in London, England, be they in Sao Paulo, Brazil, be they in the United States or Canada; pastors that are working for the Lord in our day are facing challenges and problems like we have never known before. This Executive Committee feels a passion to be able to affirm, to be able to resource and for God to give us a climate where a new generation of shepherds can arise to lead God's people.

The fourth point of this five-point vision, or commitment, shall I say, that I have made, is for cities. When I think about the cities that, by and large, some of them, untouched with the gospel, much less untouched with the message of the Church of God, breaks my heart. I am praying that God will give us a strategy for the cities of our world through church planting, through missional, compassionate efforts; whatever it takes. I have been so thrilled to see what the Lord has helped us to do in Cambodia, for example, in Phnom Penh, the testimony, that through compassion ministries, opportunities have now arisen in this largely Buddhist country with strong anti-conversion laws to now be allowed, with a little more freedom, to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Cities.

Finally, social action. I come to temporarily occupy the chair where I'm sitting, convicted that the Church of God must regain its prophetic voice to speak to the social ills of our day; and not just through rhetoric, but through action. How can we shout at camp meeting when we see our sons and daughters trapped in slavery? How can we feel good about ourselves when we see our sons and daughters victimized through drug addiction? How can we just ignore some of the totalitarian oppression that some of our church is called upon to live and to work? It's a strange land, brothers and sisters. A strange land that we're called upon to sing, but sing we must. We have no option of hanging our harps on the willow trees. Even in a strange land, the Lord has brought us for such a time as this.

I will conclude with a very special word that came to people who were living in a strange land. It actually came in the form of a letter. A letter that was written by a prophet named Jeremiah. Jeremiah wrote a letter to those who were living in the strange land of Babylon. You may have read it; it is in chapter 29.

"Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon,

‘Build houses and live in them; and plant gardens and eat their produce... Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile... For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.’”

We’ve had 1,362,000 saved. This is all just since the General Assembly. We have had a 154,000 Spirit baptisms, internationally, 48,000+ in the United States; sanctified 433,000, internationally, 108,000 in USA and Canada. Do you see the water baptisms that we have had in the churches? But I am going to tell you, our work has just begun. May God help us in this meeting, in this moment, in this time, to take advantage of the brilliant gifting’s of the people that sit around this table to unite our hearts and to do whatever it takes to fulfill the mission, for which Jesus died.