

# JOHN HAGEE: How 'Bulldog Faith' Sparked a Worldwide Ministry

*Note: This article originally appeared in the April 2004 issue of Charisma magazine.*

John Hagee was not what people would consider successful during the early days of his ministry. He slept in a garage for a year when he first began preaching—and he shared the cramped space with a Great Dane. He lived on \$7,000 during the first three years of ministry and worked odd jobs to keep food on the table. He suffered setbacks and failures. He was criticized and analyzed. Religious people investigated every word he spoke from his pulpit.

But today, pastors who walk into the impressive, 5,000-seat sanctuary of Hagee's Cornerstone Church, situated on a \$40 million plot of land in San Antonio, Texas, want to know Hagee's formula for success. The pastor, known for his Texas twang and tough preaching style, puts it simply. He became successful because he maintained a contagiously positive attitude in the face of adversity. He laughed at his problems and never took no for an answer—even when the devil whispered the word "impossible."

Success, Hagee says, is the result of what he calls "bulldog faith."

"God does not consult your past to determine your future," Hagee often tells his congregation at Cornerstone Church. "Yesterday ended last night. Look forward to today in Jesus' name!"

Hagee admits that certain things in his past—such as his mother's strong work ethic and his experiences on the football

field-shaped his message. But he insists that past mistakes alone will not destroy a person. It is how the person responds to those failures that determines the final outcome.

“Losers focus on what they are going through,” he tells his church, sounding much like an athletic coach “Winners focus on what they are going to.”

In his book *The Seven Secrets*, released in 2004, Hagee clarifies what success is not. It is not power, ability or lack of criticism, he insists.

And most of all, he adds, success is not money.

“Money can buy you a palace,” he writes, “but it cannot buy you a home filled with love.”

Hagee recalls a time when he was allowed a personal visit with Elvis Presley at the height of the entertainer’s career. The pastor saw Elvis’ gold-plated telephone and his Cadillac with the gold-flecked paint job. But what Hagee saw in and around Elvis was misery and loneliness in spite of his wealth.

Although Hagee’s book might be considered a success-motivation tool, it goes deeper than the popular you-can-do-it books. Using characters from Scripture, Hagee challenges Christians to shake loose from negative attitudes that steal faith and limit achievement. He is especially hard on those who make criticism a career.

Hagee writes: “A person with a critical spirit is someone who has divorced hope and married despair.”

Professional critics and habitual whiners won’t like *The Seven Secrets*—particularly when Hagee tells those who are dealing with hurt, failure and betrayal to simply “Get over it!” But his forceful words provide strong medicine for anyone who is interested in achieving his full potential in God.

**A Gentle Giant**

John Hagee is a multifaceted minister. He's a passionate man who can be powerfully moved by the pain and suffering of others. He is a serious student of the Bible and current affairs who will read dozens of books on subjects he considers important.

He is also a strongly opinionated commentator on the ills that plague America and the contemporary church, and he's not afraid to stake out positions on issues that put him at odds with other Christian leaders.

And he is never hesitant to state his convictions in the strongest terms, even if his pronouncements cause controversy, conflict or—in the case of his forceful stand on Israel—death threats.

"It's good to hear someone who has put in his Bible study time and is committed to telling it like it is, whether you like it or not," says award-winning country singer Randy Travis, who with his wife, Elizabeth, has been a part of the Cornerstone family for three years.

Travis says he listens to Hagee's sermon tapes daily when he's on the road. Like many Cornerstone members, he says Hagee's no-nonsense preaching combined with his care for his congregation creates a small-church feeling within a big church.

"From the first day we came here it was like we belonged," Elizabeth Travis says. "This church is like our family."

During an interview in his book-lined office, Hagee discussed his views on politics, end-times theology, the strengths and weaknesses of his Pentecostal heritage, and his own difficulties growing up in the home of a stern Assemblies of God evangelist. He also revealed a kinder and gentler side of his personality that is rarely seen by those who hear only his fire-and-brimstone TV sermons.

"I personally see myself as a gentle, easy-going person," says

Hagee while in a laid-back and affable mood.

Hagee can sound like an Old Testament prophet when he rails against the sin and degeneracy of the world around him. But in person he comes across as a thoughtful man who thinks before he speaks and carefully phrases each answer.

"I have been called a prophet by many people, but I hesitate to accept that title," he says. "The Bible teaches that if a man presumes to speak for God and is not absolutely correct he will incur the wrath of God upon himself."

But Hagee does feel compelled to speak out about the moral condition of America. And he is putting his words into action this year by mobilizing support for a constitutional amendment that will define marriage in Judeo-Christian terms.

The reason that the abortion industry and the homosexual agenda and the humanist movement have flourished in our country is because the church has been a sleeping giant," Hagee says.

"Some pastors have been dumb dogs—watchdogs who will not bark in the day of danger. If the church does not rise up and speak out and take action on issues like the sacredness of marriage, we will bequeath a moral cancer to our children and grandchildren, and we will not recognize our country 20 years from now.

"But I shudder whenever I hear a charismatic preacher say, 'God told me,' or 'I hear You, Lord,' or 'Thus sayeth the Lord.' People who say that had better be absolutely accurate lest the judgment of God fall upon them."

## **The Formative Years**

Hagee heard much about the judgment of God while growing up in the home of the Rev. William Bythel Hagee, a strict Assemblies of God (AG) evangelist who founded AG congregations in Channel View, Texas, and Houston and pastored Glad Tidings Assembly of

God in Corpus Christi before his death in 1988.

Today, many of the principles Hagee uses to run his church and manage his bustling family spring from his conflicted feelings about his own religious upbringing.

Hagee was an honor student at John H. Reagan High School in Houston, where he was involved in drama and other programs and lettered in football and three other sports. "I didn't like sports; I loved sports," the pastor says of his youth.

But his parents never attended a single game, practice or school play because his father thought such activities would lead to sin. "It was considered worldly to be at a football game, complete with cheerleaders in short skirts," he says.

Hagee was required to attend services every time the church doors were open, including Sunday mornings and evenings, and weeknights. "These people were at church so much they were too tired to sin," he says with a laugh.

Though Hagee was present in body, his mind and heart were a million miles away. Underneath his calm exterior his resentment and rebellion were boiling.

"I told some of the people at my father's church that if they were all going to heaven then hell wouldn't be half bad. I thought, if this is what Christianity is all about, you can count me out," he says.

"His dreams for his future revolved around athletics, not religion. "If there were a thousand things I wanted to be, being a preacher wouldn't have been on the list."

Then one Sunday morning in January 1958, Hagee was sitting in the back row of the balcony of his father's Houston church, his head buried deep in a trigonometry textbook and his mind working on a quadratic equation.

"All of a sudden, I responded to the altar call," he

remembers. "It was like a light came on in a dark room. I went forward and gave my life to Christ. And the next day I withdrew from John Reagan High School and enrolled in Southwestern Bible Institute." The school is now known as Southwestern Assemblies of God University.

Hagee has been preaching ever since, but the way he does things at Cornerstone—which he founded in 1976—illustrates his efforts to lessen the destructive effects of the Pentecostal legalism he endured as a teenager.

"I believe in the spiritual gifts as taught in Scripture—tongues, interpretation, prayer languages and the rest," he says. "But these gifts are not the central theme of the gospel, and they are not the central theme of this church."

Once when the late Derek Prince was preaching at Cornerstone, Prince had a prophecy for a very specific person in the congregation—a woman who had recently been diagnosed with a deadly disease that had killed a sister. But on most Sundays, services at Cornerstone seem less spontaneous and more controlled.

Some people, in fact, might walk into Cornerstone, hear Hagee's Southern drawl and assume they are in a Baptist church.

"I am a Bible-believing evangelical, and I believe that everything that happens in a worship service should be Christ-honoring and biblically based," he says. "Many things done in churches in the name of God do not represent God or His Word. But I do not allow anyone in my service to do anything that brings the attention of the congregation to them."

Nor is Hagee enthusiastic about a growing trend toward therapeutic preaching that he fears encourages people to adjust to their sin rather than repent from it. His views on counseling and recovery therapy are as blunt as they are

radical.

He once told his congregation: "Have you had an unpleasant past? Get over it."

### **Bulldog Faith**

The football team at Cornerstone Christian School is named the Warriors, and the team's home games are played in Bulldog Stadium. There are times when Hagee's rhetoric makes him sound like a warrior or even a bulldog.

Hagee is a fighter, and he likes fighting words. Give him a microphone, and he can heat the room. And that heat spreads fast, considering that his sermons are now telecast over 115 TV stations and 110 radio stations in the United States.

In one of his televised sermons, Hagee described Hollywood as "nothing but hell's public relations firm." During a Cornerstone service the Sunday morning before Thanksgiving, he offered words of doom about America's moral and spiritual corruption and denounced all nine Democratic presidential candidates as liars.

It isn't necessarily what Hagee says but how he says it that gets him in trouble. That appears to be the case with his series of televised sermons on Islam, which were cancelled by a Canadian station after the church received numerous complaints from irate viewers.

Hagee also has had plenty of attacks from religious critics as well as from the secular media. Last July *The San Antonio Express-News* questioned the income he receives from his Global Evangelism Television.

In response, Hagee told *Charisma* that he is unapologetic for his income, but at the same time he distances himself from preachers who promote a so-called prosperity gospel. His position is that he made his money the old-fashioned way—by

working for it.

In the end, criticism doesn't faze Hagee. The message he offers readers of his book, *The Seven Secrets*, is the same one he preaches to himself.

"Criticism is one of God's finest shaping tools," Hagee writes, obviously drawing from years of personal experience. "In the hands of an expert it can transform us from self-centered individuals into people who live and act like Jesus."

One of Hagee's life secrets is simple: To persevere, accept criticism graciously when it is merited. When it is unjustified, forget it. And never back down.

Hagee certainly has no plans to back down. He believes he has been placed in a national pulpit and entrusted with a responsibility to change the nation.

"All preaching must reach a point of decision in the person doing the listening," he says. "You are in a tug-of-war with the Prince of Darkness for people's souls. I feel the tension of that battle every time I stand in the pulpit and open the Bible."